hypocrisy!

By Joe Clabby

To the Reader:

This is a historical fiction story about the POTUS Executive Order 14159, signed January 20, 2025, that dramatically expanded immigration enforcement powers, detention authority, and expedited removal. It does not authorize kidnapping, but critics argue that some provisions are tantamount to kidnapping. If you lean left, you'll likely like this story; if you lean right, you'll likely not like this story.

History is generally studied to understand how we arrived at our current state; why things are the way they are; and what patterns we may be repeating. We can learn from the successes of the past, as well as from past failures. Hopefully, history teaches us not to repeat our past failures…

Sincerely,

JC

The first book, **inflection!**, covers the timeframe between:
Feb. 2025 - June, 2025

The second book in the series, **hypocrisy!**, covers the timeframe between:
June, 2025 - December, 2025

The third book in this series, **middleground!**, covers the timeframe between:
December 2025 – February 2026

This next book, ***playbook!***, covers the timeframe between:
February, 2026 and April, 2026

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Foreword – Immigrant Legislation in Context

For decades, the Republican Party has pursued a deeply conservative agenda, one that depends on securing control of all three branches of the federal government. That long-term strategy — legislative, judicial, and executive capture — has now come to fruition.

As the 2024 election approached, conservatives already held the most ideologically right-leaning Supreme Court in nearly a century: a 6–3 supermajority. The Judicial Branch, for all practical purposes, had been secured.

Then came November 5th, 2024. When the votes were counted, conservative and Make-America-Great-Again (MAGA) Republicans held 220 seats in the House, compared to the Democrats' 213. For better or for worse, the House had thus fallen prey to conservative right-wingers.

The Senate was the final legislative obstacle. If Republicans gained control there, the entire Legislative Branch would effectively be in conservative hands. They did — 49 Republican seats, 47 Democratic seats, and four independents, several of whom often vote with Republicans on issues such as immigration, on cabinet confirmations, and on spending bills. Functionally, the Senate thus became a conservative stronghold. With both chambers aligned, the Legislative Branch was captured.

Only the Executive Branch remained. And the electorate delivered it: a far-right Republican president. The trifecta was now complete. With all three branches captured and aligned, the Republican party was positioned to advance the most ambitious right-wing agenda in modern history.

What is that agenda? It is laid out in a document titled "*Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise*" — widely known as *Project 2025*.

To understand Project 2025, one must understand the Heritage Foundation, the conservative think tank behind it. Based in

Washington, D.C., the Foundation promotes what it calls "*traditional American values*" such as free enterprise, limited government, religion-influenced social policy, and a strong national defense.

The Heritage Foundation is not a new organization. It shaped Ronald Reagan's presidency through an earlier edition of *Mandate for Leadership*. Reagan used that manifesto extensively — adopting nearly two-thirds of its 2,000 recommendations. Today's administration is following the 2025 edition with similar devotion. History, it seems, is repeating itself.

The ninth edition of the "*Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise*" is publicly available as a free PDF. Anyone who wants to understand the Republican roadmap for the next four years can read it directly. It is not hidden. It is not coded. It is a blueprint in plain sight.

*

A close reading of the Project 2025 blueprint reveals a sweeping effort to restructure American governance by consolidating executive power and aligning federal agencies with a far-right policy agenda. Its proposals fall into seven major categories:

1. Restructure the federal government.
2. Shift control of education back to the states.
3. Conduct mass deportations.
4. Eliminate DEI and gender-related protections.
5. Restore fossil fuels and abandon climate agreements.
6. Restrict voting rights.
7. Control information by limiting federal communication with social media platforms.

Among its most consequential proposals: reorganizing the Justice Department, eliminating the Department of Education, and implementing the most restrictive immigration framework in modern U.S. history. The immigration plan emphasizes rapid executive action, harsh enforcement, and sweeping deportations — affecting asylum seekers, undocumented immigrants, legal immigrants, and U.S. families alike.

hypocrisy!

*

For many Americans, these policies stand in stark contrast to their professed religions. For Christians, Leviticus 19:33–34 states:

> *"When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong... you shall love him as yourself."*

Those who champion punitive immigration policies while claiming Christian identity fit the definition of hypocrisy.

This book examines one of the most alarming components of the Project 2025 agenda: the effort to carry out mass deportations using a militarized enforcement apparatus designed to instill fear not only in immigrants, but in American citizens as well.

Chapter 1 – Just to be Clear…

For those who may think I'm a liberal Democrat: I am not! I'm a *Fiscal Republican*. Like my conservative brethren, I want government budgets to be lean. I want non-essential programs to be cut. I also want taxes to be cut. And, I want our government to live within its means.

In the last election, for the first time in my life, I did not vote for the Republican presidential candidate. I chose not to vote for either presidential candidate.

In his previous term, our re-elected POTUS delivered on several major conservative priorities: substantial corporate tax cuts, the appointment of more than 200 conservative federal judges and three Supreme Court justices, the renegotiation of key trade agreements, and the imposition of tariffs on China.

But his record was mixed. He failed to secure meaningful infrastructure legislation, he did not replace the *Affordable Care Act* with a more balanced healthcare alternative, and his promise of a Mexico-funded border wall proved illusory.

But two things that he did in his first term really rubbed me the wrong way:

1. In "doctor-mode," he publicly floated the idea of using disinfectant "by injection" or "almost a cleaning" as a possible COVID-19 treatment. Not only was that ignorant, but it also endangered the lives of Americans. Doing so could kill you.
2. But the most egregious of his faults was his "alleged" involvement in the January 6th insurrection. I believe that he encouraged, if not spearheaded, that insurrection.

Accordingly, in the last election, I refused to vote for a person who provided dangerous medical advice, and whom I consider to be an insurrectionist!

*

One of the most important principles of governance, at least for me, is that our government should match its spending to its revenues. The United States should not be spending more than it brings in through taxes and other revenue sources, nor should we be borrowing from foreign governments and institutions at high interest rates to fund the pork-barrel projects of either party. Fiscal discipline matters. A nation, like a household, should have a balanced budget.

As of June 2025, our total gross national debt sits at approximately $36.22 trillion. I think it's useful to think of that debt as personal debt. If this debt were distributed evenly to our citizenry, every man, woman and child and other genders in the United States would owe approximately $106,451 in debt payment. So, you're over a hundred thousand dollars in debt today — congratulations! Now extrapolate this to the household debt. Each household in America is approximately $273,914 in debt! And note: with the current proposed budget, this could get worse. Much worse...

Our politicians need to show a little backbone. They need to resist borrowing money in order to support their favorite pork projects. And this applies to both sides of the aisle — these guys, by borrowing trillions of dollars, are leveraging our future, and the future of our children. Stop it!

*

I generally support deregulation, except for when it comes to protecting the environment. Given the chance, people will deplete fisheries, cut down every tree in sight, pollute land/air/sea, and otherwise destroy their own environment.

I support regulations that restrict environmental damage.

*

Three final points about my expectations for our federal government:

1. I want a government that takes the elimination of waste, fraud, and abuse seriously. The administration's so-called

Department of Government Efficiency was supposed to root out waste and fraud, yet it failed spectacularly to meet its own savings targets. The administration claimed that it could save taxpayers two trillion dollars through strategic government services cuts. Estimates are that $215 billion was saved — a far, far cry from the two trillion dollars promised.

2. Second, given the questionable behavior we've already seen from this administration — accepting foreign "gifts," for example — I have little confidence in the government's commitment to integrity. This may be the most corrupt U.S. government that I have ever seen. I expect corruption to be exposed and punished.

3. And third, stop the cover-ups. This administration's cover-ups are obvious. Release the Epstein files. Release the Jack Smith report. The public isn't naïve; we can see when information is being withheld from us. We see our *Department of Justice* shielding the President and his cronies. Stop the cover-ups. Come clean!

Chapter 2 – My Arrest

I am a sixty-year-old woman.

Except for my penis.

And that penis creates a real dilemma for arresting officers.

*

I was one of the three hundred and eighty-five people arrested in Los Angeles on June 11th, 2025, as we protested the *Immigration and Customs Enforcement* (ICE) agency's brutal, targeted kidnappings of undocumented members of the local Hispanic population.

I was charged with resisting arrest under *California Penal Code 148* because I didn't move quickly enough when an officer told me to "leave the area." Code 148 makes it a crime to "*resist, obstruct, or delay*" a police officer. So, I was tackled, pinned to the ground, my hands were zip-tied behind my back, then I was stood up and shoved into a waiting prisoner transport vehicle. When I arrived at the police station, I was booked and placed in a holding cell.

*

And this is where having a penis confuses arresting officers. I was wearing a dress; I have boobs; my legs were shaven; and I did a good job hiding my wrinkles with make-up, particularly with my mascara and lipstick. My hair length is a "long bob" that grazes my shoulders. My hair color is burgundy, with streaks of auburn. My eyes are brown, and I have a six-foot-one frame, which I know is tall for a woman. I'm a little muscular. I have big hands and big feet. I have thin lips and a slightly upturned nose. But still, despite the penis, I insist that I'm a woman. Is that unreasonable?

Apparently so. I was born "*Oliver Thomaston*," not "*Olivia Thomaston*" as it says on my driver's license. When the officers examined my license, they noticed my "*gender marker*." In twenty-two states, when you obtain a driver's license, you are asked to identify your gender. You can be either male (M), female (F), or non-binary (X). My license gender marker reads "X."

The city of Los Angeles does not have a separate jail cell for "X" people. Sometimes "X" people are placed in solitary confinement, "for your own protection." But, due to the vast number of arrests that day, the solitary cells were taken. So, I was shoved into a men's holding cell. And I can assure you that was not "for my own protection."

*

It was ugly. There I was in a dress with a dozen surly-looking male prisoners. I got the usual "*Hey Baby*" mocking; the misogynist *"I hate people like you"* looks; and one guy got right in my face and said, *"You're in the wrong cell – queer bait*."

I was horrified. I tensed up. I was afraid. I was greatly outnumbered. "*What are they going to do to me*?"

The guy who called me "*queer bait*" had gone to the opposite side of the cell. But then he started to cross the cell in my direction; his hands were clenched; I think he was getting ready to punch me out.

Then, the next thing I knew, I was surrounded by six other cellmates. One of them said to the others, "*Ella está de nuestro lado*." The men nodded, then surrounded me. I prepared for the worst — being battered by a whole gang of men. I clenched my fists, ready to defend myself against the coming onslaught.

Then, the Spanish-speaking man translated what he had just said. "I just told them, '*She's on our side*.'"

I now had half a dozen protectors! The six men created a phalanx around me. One of my protectors assured me, "We're all in this together."

Visibly shaken, I sat on a bench in the corner of the cell, while my protectors stood watch. I didn't feel elated, as I should have. I was afraid the entire time I was there.

I waited six hours for my bail to be posted. I left the station a wreck but managed to make it back to my hotel room.

And that's when I broke down and cried.

*

In April, the *California Department of Justice* reported a total of 3,104 immigrant detainees in state detention centers. The Adelanto ICE Processing Center, about 85 miles northeast of Los Angeles, surged from just three detainees at the start of 2025 when POTUS assumed office, to 1,200 detainees by June 17, following major ICE raids in Los Angeles and other cities.

Many of these arrested individuals were honest laborers drawn from diverse workplaces. During the recent captures, ICE agents focused on *Home Depot*, on *Ambiance Apparel* – where forty workers were arrested, and on locations where immigrants were trying to follow the law by checking-in for legal hearings on their immigration status.

One such example of this deceit is what ICE did at the *Edward R. Roybal Federal Building* in downtown Los Angeles. ICE agents targeted immigrants who had voluntarily been enrolled in the *ICE Alternatives to Detention (ATD) program*. These immigrants were following ICE directions by going to the courts and making themselves known while they awaited decisions on their deportation proceedings. Masked ICE officers surrounded and captured many of those petitioners. Now they're in prison for trying to follow the deceptive guidance of the United States federal government.

Of the total number of immigrants captured nationwide, 93% have no violent convictions. *That's 9 out of every 10 people who have been detained and imprisoned have never committed any sort of violent crime*. ICE has arrested them for misdemeanors because they are "undocumented." A misdemeanor is a type of offense that's considered less serious than a felony but more serious than A civil violation like jaywalking. Typical misdemeanors include offenses such as trespassing, disorderly conduct, vandalism, or graffiti.

Between Jan. 20 through late June 2025, ICE arrested 112,000 immigrants. Some of these were legitimate American citizens who had been "*accidentally*" arrested. These citizens, according to ICE officials, were not arrested because of their *racial profile*.

As additional budget money is being found to increase the number of ICE agents and expand detention facilities, I project that the number of detainees will be approximately a quarter-million people by this time next year. This means that a quarter of a million people will be in jail because they lack documentation, not because they committed murder, rape, robbery and other felonies. THAT'S 250,000 PEOPLE CAPTURED AND IMPRISONED BY THE UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT!

In prisons, especially the foreign ones, many of these immigrants, who have never committed a crime except crossing a border, are being beaten, tortured, raped, starved, and denied medical attention — *with no end in sight*. Imagine, life in prison for *crossing a border*?

This is insane. This is NOT the America I have come to know and love.

Chapter 3 – Carefully Telling Mary

After I was released from jail, I phoned my best friend, now my roommate, Mary Shelly, to tell her what had happened to me in Los Angeles.

"*You did what? You got arrested?*" came Mary's shocked voice when told her what had happened.

"Yes, Ma'am, I now have a criminal record. Obstructing an officer... Apparently, if you don't move quickly enough, ICE agents have the right to knock you to the ground and arrest you."

"*You went to jail*?"

"I did. And it was horrible. They put me in a men's holding cell. And, of course, as could be expected, I got the usual dirty looks and taunting."

"Oh my God, Olivia," Mary's alarmed voice rose. She was starting to freak. "Are you okay?" she asked, greatly concerned. "Did they hurt you?"

"To be truthful, I'm still a little bit shaken up. I was afraid they were going to beat me up." I paused. I suddenly realized that my incarceration was not a topic that should be discussed with Mary, given her past situation.

"I wish I were there for you," she said, still concerned about my well-being. "That must have been so traumatic for you. Is there anything I can do? I want to be there for you, just as you have have always been for me."

The thing about Mary is that she is a spousal abuse victim. Her former husband, a meth addict, beat her regularly when he got really high. So, you have to be careful about discussing anything that involves abuse with her. She has battered woman syndrome; discussing topics such as my detention only increase her anxiety.

"I'll be fine — honestly. I just can't wait to get home..."

Chapter 4 – Our Predicament

In May 2025, just as the Spring semester ended, my new roommate, Mary Shelley, an assistant professor of History, and I, a professor of Political Science, were fired from our professorial teaching positions at the *College of Maine.*

We deserved it — we were insubordinate.

Though we had been warned not to draw more attention to the College on the topic of *Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion* (DEI), we continued our protests of the Federal government's denial of DEI protections to the LGBTQ+ communities nationwide. We garnered a lot of attention, both in local media and especially on social networks. We even created an Internet streaming "reality TV" show that became a smashing success.

Our motive in continuing our protests despite being warned to tread lightly by the College was to force our school to take a more aggressive stance against anti-Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion presidential *Executive Orders.*

What bugs me the most is that the College teaches morals and ethics — I felt it was time for the College to put its money where its mouth is and take the moral, ethical high ground by resisting the federal government's anti-DEI pressure. The College did not do so...

Look at the College course syllabus. Consider *PHI 100 – Contemporary Moral Problems.* It delves into issues such as abortion, affirmative action, euthanasia, feminism, environmental ethics, and racism. The federal government's attack on our DEI rights is most certainly a contemporary moral issue.
There is also *PHI 230 – Ethics.* It explores moral systems and examines their effects on real-world ethical dilemmas.
Don't just teach morals and ethics —practice them!

*

The school, on the other hand, felt it would be unwise to provoke the Feds, who had already put federal funds for various College programs on hold following the POTUS anti-DEI Executive

Orders. Provoking the Federal Government put the school's federal funding at risk — so the safest position the school could take would be to "*play ball*" with the Feds.

To accommodate the Feds, the College of Maine renamed its "*Office of Diversity and Inclusion*" to the "*Office for Community and Connections" (OCC).* But, although the public language has changed, the College of Maine officials emphasize that the core mission and services remain unchanged. The College says it is still committed to providing students with support, education, and fostering a sense of community.

I can't blame the College for not standing up to the Federal Government. At risk were several million dollars in federal funding should the College overtly and publicly reject the government's anti-DEI demands. But call me "altruistic," I no longer wished to work for an organization that doesn't practice what it preaches.

Chapter 5 – Sloberina

After the College fired me, I cast a wide net across the country for a new faculty position. Maine had nothing — no openings for full professors of Political Science — so I expanded my search nationwide. One promising lead surfaced at UCLA, which is how I happened to be in Los Angeles during the June ICE surge.

*

Before I left, Mary and I made a practical decision. Since she'd been evicted from her faculty housing the moment the College terminated her, she needed somewhere to land while she figured out her next move. My house had space, and she had no idea where she'd eventually end up, so moving in with me was the obvious choice. She arrived with an impressive number of belongings — furniture, cookware, books — so my basement was quickly transformed into her personal storage locker.

*

I say this with affection: *Mary is a lovable disaster*. What used to be my pristine guest room now looks like a clothing tornado touched down — blouses, shoes, and the occasional rogue sock scattered like confetti. Half-finished coffee cups appear on my coffee table (never on a coaster), used K-cups linger on the counter, and the cream somehow never makes it back into the fridge. And for reasons known only to her, she never tightens jar lids, so I've become intimately familiar with the sensation of unexpected spills.

Privately, I call her "*Sloberina*." I would never say it aloud. I just sigh, smile, and clean up whatever she's left in her wake.

*

As for Mary herself — she's stunning. Truly. Long black hair, bright green eyes, a heart-shaped face, and those dimples that appear when she smiles and make her look like she stepped out of a Renaissance painting. She's petite, graceful, and effortlessly striking in a way that turns heads without her ever noticing.

*

What matters most to me, though, is her spirit. Mary is deeply accepting, grounded, and utterly unfazed by the fact that I'm a

transgender woman. If anything, she treats it as one more interesting facet of who I am, not a defining feature. And because she has no interest in dating — understandably, given her past — my being trans removes any sense of romantic expectation. We're simply safe with each other.

*

Despite her quirks, I love having her at my home. We cook elaborate meals, binge shows, dissect the news, and dive into political debates that stretch late into the night. We're two peas in a pod — messy, mismatched, but perfectly aligned where it counts.

Chapter 6 – Our Friend Alex

Because we couldn't get the College to support our DEI protest position, we took it upon ourselves to find ways to protest POTUS's anti-LGBTQ+ agenda. We implemented a "grassroots" campaign, a bottom-up movement driven by ordinary people with a goal of affecting political change.

With the help of our mutual friend, reporter Alex Monroe of *PCPTV*, we started our protest by created sophisticated videos that showed the injustice of the administration's discontinuance of DEI protections. But something was missing: entertainment value. It was Alex's idea to position these videos as an ongoing reality TV show. And a damn good idea at that!

Alex also reported stories about our firing, portraying us as heroes who had risked, then lost our jobs, because we stood by our moral convictions.

*

Just an aside: PCPTV is what is called a "*digital-first*" news outlet. It differs from traditional broadcast news providers in that this news outlet prioritizes online audio and video news delivery as opposed to print and broadcast channels. This means that instead of focusing on newspapers, broadcast or cable TV, or radio as primary distribution methods, digital-first outlets use websites, mobile apps, social media, podcasts, and video streaming as their primary news delivery tools.

Don't look now, but this is the direction broadcast news is heading. It's an evolutionary step toward the next generation of how people will receive their news.

Think of digital-first in this way: some people want only local news, such as nearby events, recaps of past events, weather updates, information about fires and disasters, local government news, and stories of local interest. Others may want only state news, only national news, or a mix of both. Imagine being able to pick just the news you want, easily line up your streams, and watch only the news in the order and duration you prefer. Don't care about local school issues? — skip that stream. Don't like special

interest stories? — skip that stream. Do like weather reports — choose that stream. And so on.

No wonder the station's motto is "*News the Way YOU Want It.*"

*

After completing a series of our reality TV show, we aggressively promoted our videos across as many social media outlets as possible. We utilized *Facebook* for its broad demographic reach, *Instagram* for visual storytelling using short-form reels, and *YouTube* as a platform to release political commentary, interviews, and educational content. We also used *X* to release real-time updates on our progress, as well as to tag journalists and join political discussions. *TikTok* appealed to our target audience, so we reached out to Gen Z listeners with a slew of short, punchy videos on that platform. We also used *Reddit*, *LinkedIn*, *Nextdoor*, *Telegram*, *Mastodon* and *BlueSky*.

Our shows were interesting, controversial, and well received. We quickly developed a loyal following!

Chapter 7 – Our "Cause Célèbre"

We called our reality TV show "*Cause Célèbre*" because we wanted a show title that made it clear that we were all about protesting federal government actions. A *cause célèbre* is a case, event, or controversy that becomes widely known and fiercely debated. The federal government's position on diversity, equity and inclusion is controversial and has deep societal implications. It has turned into a political dispute that has captured the public's attention. Mary and I like drawing attention to the government's denial of civil rights to people of color and members of the LGBTQ+ communities — we like pointing out the ridiculousness of the government's gender-denying homophobic/transphobic/-queerphobic behavior. We like rubbing their nose in it...

Mary and I traveled across the United States interviewing members of the LGBTQ+ communities, providing concrete examples of how mean-spirited, inhumane, and un-Christian the federal government's policies are toward those communities.

*

At its peak, our show had almost 50,000 viewers — and about 22,000 subscribers — making it one of the most popular Internet reality shows on *YouTube*.

Mary and I were delightfully amused by the success of our show: *we had become small-scale celebrities*.

*

Regarding technical and marketing assistance with our social media campaigns, I would also like to draw attention to one of my star students: Fernando Rodríguez Iglesias Candelaria, whom we affectionately call "*Tito*." Tito helped create and manage teams of student volunteers who worked on social media outreach, getting our videos on as many channels as they could locate. He is a big part of the reason that the videos of Mary and me protesting POTUS executive orders went viral.

We used our reality TV videos to encourage students to protest the anti-DEI position of the United States government. We had great success in getting students to participate in several *No Kings* events. We continue to press that agenda today...

Chapter 8 – Mary's New Protest Angle

It took me a couple of days to get back to my home in Bangor, Maine, from Los Angeles. I had to cancel my hotel room, repack, change my flight schedule, and get the hell out of Dodge.

In the meantime, Mary called Alex to tell him what had happened.

*

"*Say that again, Mary. She did what?*" Alex's voice cracked with disbelief. "I just can't picture the Professor pushing back at a cop. She's too mild-mannered for that."

I exhaled slowly. "It sounds like the officer barked an order, and when he didn't respond fast enough, they tackled him, cuffed him, and threw him in jail."

Alex went quiet for a beat, processing. "So... she's a trans woman. Did they put her in with the men?"

"They did. And she's still shaken."

That flipped a switch in him. Reporter mode. "Mary, this is a big story. '*Maine Professor Arrested at LA Immigration Protest.*' I can already see the follow-ups. This could be big. We should meet before she gets back and brainstorm about how to proceed building this story. This could be the new direction for *Cause Célèbre!*"

*

I met Alex at his studio in Bangor, near the airport. Alex has been indispensable to our movement — not just a reporter, but a creative engine. He's written scripts, shaped narratives, and used his digital magic to make our protest streams look like they came from a national newsroom. He started as Olivia's good friend, but somewhere along the way, he became mine too.

What I admire most is how fast his mind works. Give him a situation, and within seconds he's found the angle, the headline, the emotional hook. When things get chaotic, he's the one we trust to make sense of it.

*

There's something else about Alex — something I pretend not to notice. He's my age, single, and he lights up a little when I walk into a room. As an excuse, he pretends that his coyness is due to the fact that I "*test well with audiences*," but I've caught the way he looks at me when he thinks I'm not paying attention. It's a look of fondness...

*

Alex, Olivia and I used to go out for pizza and beers after editing segments of *Cause Célèbre*. Those were simply supposed to be "business meetings" where we would discuss our shows and spitball new ideas. But, to me, those meetings seemed like "unofficial dates." Alex would sit next to me — he'd listen closely to what I had to say — there was a lot of eye contact going on. Albeit, with Olivia there, those dates were chaperoned...

I haven't dated in nearly a decade. The last man I loved turned into someone unrecognizable — someone who used fear as a weapon. A wife beater. I escaped, but the scars still whisper warnings to me. Alex, for his part, lost his wife in a car accident. Olivia says he pulls away when women get too close, burying himself in work until they give up.

I believe that Alex and I are two people with ghosts that haunt us. Two people who get lonely. Two people wondering if it's time to try again.

*

I hadn't considered Olivia's arrest as a strategic opportunity, but Alex was right — we could move beyond our sole focus on DEI to include a focus on immigration enforcement. This could broaden our reach, draw in new supporters, and create a new narrative. It made sense that we should go in that direction. Like DEI, the immigration situation was, yet again, another awful and potentially unlawful executive order.

"How do we start?" I asked.

"Well," he said, thinking aloud, "I need a better grasp on our immigration policies. The whole landscape. How we got here. I

need to understand immigration in historical context."

"Alex," I said, "Let's go back to my place. I've got a whole immigration archive on my computer. It might help us both put immigration in historical context."

"That sounds perfect," Alex agreed. "I've got to wrap some stuff up here, but I can be there in about an hour," Alex offered.

"Deal!" I said. "See you then."

*

This would be the first time that Alex and I were alone together, without our chaperone. I wondered if things were about to get a little "awkward."

Chapter 9 – Patterns and Policy

As a former Assistant Professor of History at the College of Maine, I've spent years tracing the zigzagging path of U.S. immigration policy. If there's one thing the historical record makes painfully clear, it's this: our politicians have lurched from one philosophy to another with all the steadiness of a ship in a hurricane. Rules change, enforcement changes, rhetoric changes — and immigrant communities are left trying to navigate a landscape that never stops shifting under their feet.

Here's the broad arc of immigration policy as I see it.

- First, we were restrictive.
- Then we embraced quotas.
- Then, for a time, we tried to be humane.
- Now, we're in *punitive* mode.

We've now swung into punishing immigrants for being here illegally — with devastating consequences for anyone caught without papers. Sieg Heil!

Given our history of failed immigration policies, it's no wonder immigrant families are bewildered by the government's new catch-and-imprison strategy. It doesn't resemble the openly discriminatory policies of the early 20th century, nor does it echo the more compassionate approaches of the mid-twentieth century. This is something else entirely — a new creature, stitched together with fear, secrecy, and political theater.

Somewhere along the line, someone in Washington decided the solution to undocumented immigration was to build a shadow police force and pour billions into detention centers. A brilliant plan, truly — if the goal was to create chaos, fear, and a sprawling bureaucracy with no measurable success. Nice fix, boneheads

*

To prepare for Alex's visit, I did what I always do when the present feels chaotic: I delved back into history looking for patterns. Patterns are my compass. They don't just explain the past — they warn us about the future. And the pattern I saw emerging now was one I recognized all too well. *Scapegoating*...

Governments have always looked for convenient scapegoats when they need to distract the public or consolidate power. The Nazis blamed the Jews. Other regimes blamed other ethnic minorities, or political dissidents, or religious outsiders. It's a classic move: *pick a vulnerable group, paint them as the source of society's problems, and watch fear do the rest.*

So, is the U.S. government now scapegoating undocumented Spanish-speaking immigrants and Muslims from certain countries — blaming them for economic instability, crime, and cultural change? You bet your arce they are.

Chapter 10 – Exposing Hypocrisy

By studying patterns, I can identify the mistakes that are being repeated, and I can help call them out before they calcify into something even more dangerous. History gives us language, perspective, and the courage to say, "*We've seen this before — and we're not falling for it again.*"

Looking backward also helps expose hypocrisy and amplifies the voices that powerful people try to silence. That's the heart of our DEI protests. We're trying to show Americans — especially the ones who claim to follow Jesus — that condemning LGBTQ+ people is not only cruel, but also inconsistent with the very teachings they claim to uphold.

*

As for the immigrant deportations, "*love thy neighbor*" isn't a suggestion. It's a core of Jesus' messages to all of his followers. We want these self-appointed moral gatekeepers, these extremist Republicans, to wake up, look in the mirror, and recognize the harm they're doing. We want them to stop persecuting people simply because they don't fit their narrow gender definitions and their document requirements.

History teaches us that persecution always starts with a story — a lie told often enough that people start to believe it. Our job is to interrupt that story, expose it, and replace it with truth.

*

As I awaited Alex's arrival, I started focusing on creating an "immigration narrative." How would I tell our country's immigration story?

I decided that I would look at the history of immigration in this country and construct a linear story about the mistakes we have made, and then suggest how we should progress to move forward to policies that offer more humane treatment of immigrants in the future.

Chapter 11 – Sorting My Immigration File

As I waited for Alex to arrive, I booted up my PC and opened a folder I'd labeled "*Immigration Policies*." It's my personal catchall of every article, study, or stray thought I've collected over the years about how this country treats the people who want to join it. The problem is that the folder is a mess. No order, no structure, just decades of policy whiplash piled on top of itself.

If I was going to walk Alex through the history, I needed to impose some order on this chaos. So, I started sorting. I created four folders to represent the four eras, the four distinct mindsets — the four versions of American immigration policy over time.

*

I created four new folders:

1830s–1880s: "Open borders" (with asterisks).

Technically, anyone could come. In practice, we found ways to keep out the people we didn't like. Ethnic prejudice wasn't a bug in the system; it was the system.

1890s–1940s: Quotas and eugenics.

We wrapped discrimination in pseudoscience. Certain ethnic groups were labeled "inferior," and quotas were designed to keep them out so they wouldn't "pollute" the gene pool. And then came the internment camps — entire families locked away because of their ancestry. Innocent people treated as enemies. Sound familiar?

1950s–1980s: Civil rights and reform.

We finally dismantled the racial barriers, though we kept the quota mindset for a while. In 1965, we shifted toward family reunification and skilled labor — a rare moment when compassion and practicality aligned.

1990s–present: Expansion... then fear.

We raised immigration caps, created the *Diversity Visa Lottery*, and opened more legal pathways. And then the pendulum swung back. Security became the buzzword. Deportations surged.

Detention centers increased. We started claiming that imprisoning desperate people was somehow for "our own protection."

*

By the time I finished sorting, I had a rough outline — a clear arc that I could use to walk Alex through the long, messy evolution of U.S. immigration policy. And as I organized the files, something else clicked into place...

To complete my narrative, I needed to propose a fix to this immigration problem. And then I recalled the *2025 Dignity Act*.

*

The Dignity Act of 2025 is a major bipartisan immigration reform proposal introduced in the U.S. House on July 15, 2025, by Rep. María Elvira Salazar (R-FL) with Rep. Veronica Escobar (D-TX), Supporting it is a coalition of Republican and Democratic co-sponsors.

What this act aims to do is combine strict border enforcement with legal status opportunities for long-term undocumented immigrants. In other words, continue removing undocumented immigrants while providing new ways for immigrants to become citizens.

The actual name of this act is the DIGNIDAD Act — which stands for "*Dignity for Immigrants while Guarding our Nation to Ignite and Deliver the American Dream.*"

Its purpose is to modernize our strained and outdated immigration system; provide a way for our undocumented population to achieve "*conditional legal status*"; address the overwhelmed border enforcement capacity situation; and, find ways to address labor shortages in key industries using "legalized" immigrants.

The border security and enforcement plan calls for expanded physical barriers, heavy use of drones for surveillance and discovery, radar, and 24/7 surveillance, and the use of a plan called "*E-Verify*" to make sure that immigrants are here legally.

This would make it easier for employers to hire immigrants. This section of the act also calls for tougher penalties for traffickers, repeat border crossers, and smugglers.

The "*Dignity*" aspect of this act calls for the enactment of a new legal status for immigrants — making it possible to achieve a legal status to be in the United States — without offering a means to achieve citizenship.

The act also features "*Dreamer*" protections. Dreamers are undocumented young people who were brought to the U.S. as children, grew up here, and have lived most of their lives in the U.S. without formal legal status. They likely have attended U.S. schools; they speak English; and participate in American life, except on paper. They are culturally "Americans."

What the bill proposes is a version of the 2001 DREAM act, which never passed, that allows a ten-year conditional status in the U.S.; it provides a path to permanent residency through higher education, military service, or employment. And it requires background checks.

The bill also calls for humanitarian campuses to be created that would house asylum seekers until their status is reviewed. And it provides penalties for fraudulent claims.

For documented workers, this bill would put forward a $70 billion *American Workforce Fund* for apprenticeships, retraining, and education. This funding would come from immigration fees, not the U.S. taxpayers.

And finally, this bill calls for the modernization of our legal immigration system. It would track immigrant employment, establish student visa rules, and reduce green card backlogs.

What do I think of this potential solution to immigrant processing? First, the bill has Republican and Democratic co-sponsors — so it's bipartisan. Congress, recently, has not often demonstrated support for bipartisan bills — so I think it may have

a tough time getting approved.

What bothers me most about this bill is that hard-right conservatives view the bill as a kind of amnesty for immigrants. And the fact that the bill does not provide a path toward citizenship is also bothersome. But, considering what a mess our immigration processes have been in the past, this bill would go a long way toward fixing a long, broken system. It ain't perfect — but it represents a huge step in the right direction.

As for the status of this bill, it has been introduced and referred to seven committees. No hearings, markups or floor votes have been scheduled. And the Senate has not produced a companion bill. So, in short, it is stalled. You would think that because almost 70% of Americans don't like the current immigration/-deportation policy, that Congress might look to solve the problem. Think again... There is growing public desire for a balanced approach to immigration, but the Dignity bill's political path to enactment remains uncertain.

*

With the historic patterns that I had identified, combined with the Dignity bill potential solution, I now had the basics for a new narrative around the "immigration problem." I could trace the history of immigration in this country. And I could steer listeners toward potential future remedies.

I also concluded that the rough narrative that I had just put together could easily translate into a new series of shows.

Chapter 12 – The Immigration Drill-Down

When Alex arrived, he wrapped me in a hug.

"Don't fret over Olivia," he murmured. "She's tough. She'll get through this."

The hug caught me off guard. Alex isn't a casual-touch kind of man; he's all angles and intensity, not warmth. But this time he held on just a beat too long — long enough for me to wonder whether he was comforting me or revealing something he hadn't quite admitted to himself...

And yes, the comfort helped. My nerves about Olivia were still frayed, and it was... nice, frankly, to feel someone else carrying a little of that weight with me.

*

I thanked him for the concern and guided him to the dining room table, where my laptop was already open. We sat shoulder to shoulder, close enough that I could feel the warmth of him as we leaned toward the screen. Cozy, in a way neither of us acknowledged out loud.

I opened my immigration folders and began walking him through the four eras of U.S. immigration policy — the architecture of prejudice, reform, fear, and contradiction that I'd spent the morning sorting.

*

I started with my "open borders" file. "So, here's one of the earliest attempts to control immigration," I said, pulling up the *Page Law of the 1870s*. "It specifically targeted Asian laborers and women."

"So, we started our immigration policy by singling out specific groups," Alex said, eyebrows raised.

"Exactly. And that was a hundred and fifty years ago. And I can't help wondering if we're doing the same thing today — just with different groups."

"Interesting angle," he said, jotting it down.

I clicked to the next file. "And here's the *Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882*. It literally banned Chinese immigrants and denied naturalization to those already here."

Alex let out a low whistle. "They didn't even pretend to hide the prejudice. They named the law after the people they were excluding."

He was hooked now — leaning in, absorbing every detail — so I kept going.

"Let's jump ahead a few decades." I scrolled until I found the *Immigration Act of 1924*. "This one imposed quotas favoring Northern Europeans and restricting everyone else. And this era is when the *U.S. Border Patrol* was created."

I paused, letting the next point land. "Anti-immigrant sentiment was so intense that membership in the Ku Klux Klan surged."

"You're kidding," Alex said, stunned. "People joined hate groups because they didn't like immigrants?"

I nodded. "Documented fact. In fact, I've closely studied this era." I paused. "I've got something you've got to see," I told Alex. "I'll be right back." I stood, crossed into my bedroom, examined my bookshelf, and retrieved the book that I'd written about that era. I flipped through the *Table of Contents*, found the chapter I needed, and returned to the table — Alex waiting, pen in hand, was ready for the next revelation.

Chapter 13 – A Brief Interlude: My Politics Book

"Check this out," I said, handing Alex my book, "*Political Patterns of the 1920s*."

"Not exactly a bestseller, but the academics loved it," I explained.

He blinked at the cover. "You wrote this?" The surprise in his voice was genuine, almost boyish. "I didn't know you were an author."

I'm not sure why that startled him, but I could feel myself climbing a rung or two on his internal esteem ladder.

"Read 'em and weep," I said, flipping to the chapter on the *1924 Democratic National Convention*.

*

I stepped out for a moment to make us some coffee, giving him space to absorb the chapter. When I returned, Alex was still flipping through the book, eyebrows raised.

"I had no idea," he said. "It was the Democratic Party demonizing minorities back then? The same party that's been pushing civil rights for decades? And they openly bragged about being in the Klan; they bragged about being bigots."

"They were so proud of their bigotry," I agreed, "That they even had an event at their national convention that they called "*The Klanbake*!"

"It's like today's politics but reversed. The Democrats were the conservatives and the—"

"And the Republicans were also conservative," I cut in. "Both parties were isolationist, *anti-immigrant*, and opposed to most social reforms. Neither party was a friend to immigrants."

I let that settle, then added, "Strange but true: Republicans and Democrats actually agreed on something — their hatred for immigrants."

*

After Alex finished perusing my book, we returned to my immigration files. I pulled up the *Immigration Act of 1924* and explained it to Alex.

"So basically," Alex said, scanning the page, "if you came from the '*right WHITE countries*,' you were welcome?"

"That's the gist," I said. "*Racial favoritism dressed up as policy.* And it's still echoing today."

Alex agreed, quoting Yankees catcher Yogi Berra's famous resignedly saying: "It's déjà vu all over again."

*

We kept digging. Eventually we reached the *Bracero Program*. "During World War II," I explained, "we opened the door to Mexican laborers. From 1942 to 1964, they came here legally to work."

"Why don't we have something like that now?" Alex asked. "We need farm labor."

"Exactly. It worked. But today's government is so fixated on security and enforcement that it ignores our past successes. Immigrants have been scapegoated, and the government is seeking to punish them."

*

I moved him forward in time.

"In 1965, the *Hart-Celler Act* abolished quotas," I said.

"So, we were becoming more humane," Alex half-questioned, half-observed.

"Right. 'Civil Rights' thinking finally blended with immigration policy."

I continued: "Then came the *Refugee Act of 1980* — our first real refugee system. And the *Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986*, which legalized millions and penalized employers who hired undocumented workers."

"Why can't we do something like that now?" he asked.

"We can. And should..."

*

I opened the final folder.

"Now we hit the 1990s to the present. This era is all about perceived threats — security, disease, crime. During this era we created DHS, ICE, CBP, USCIS. *Enforcement* became the centerpiece. We expelled people during COVID. And we started building a system designed not to manage immigration, but to prevent it."

"So, we've built giant police forces to protect us from 'immigrant criminals,'" Alex said. "*That's not immigration policy — it's immigration prevention.*"

"Unless you're a professional with a specialized skill," I added, "you're not wanted."

*

Alex reviewed his notes. "So, over the years, our policies have been exclusionary, racially motivated, and restrictive. Exclusionary because they targeted specific groups. Racially motivated because they favored white immigrants. Restrictive because of quotas."

Alex is really quick. I would've given him an A+ for this lesson.

*

"One more thing," I said. "Under current law, no more than 7% of family- or employment-based green cards can go to any one country. Big countries like Mexico hit their cap instantly. If you're Mexican and trying to reunite with family here, the wait can be twenty years."

Alex exhaled. “History is repeating itself. We’re targeting Hispanics. We don’t want those ‘wetbacks’ here. We’re closing the borders. And now we’re incarcerating hundreds of thousands of people.”

“America the beautiful,” I said quietly, “is becoming America the not-so-beautiful.”

Chapter 14 – That Hug?

Alex's lesson was over. He now had a good, high-level understanding of immigration history.

We decided to adjourn to the living room for a nightcap. I offered him the only snack I had, popcorn, chased by a dry chardonnay. I set the bottle of wine on our coffee table; Alex opened it and poured a glass for each of us.

We spent the next half hour discussing potential videos that we could make. We came up with a list of six potential projects, and we concluded that the first one should be about what had happened to Olivia in Los Angeles.

Alex assured me that PCPTV would be a hundred percent behind him in his efforts to cover our stories. Our videos, Alex believed, would attract a lot of viewers for his news outlet.

*

When Alex left, I thought about the evening we had just spent together.

First, there was that hug. What was that all about?

Second on my mind: *should* we continue to stir the "*protest pot*?" I'm sure the current administration doesn't want vocal criticism; it wants obedience and adherence to its new world order. Are we asking for trouble and possible retribution by adding an immigration protest to our palette?

Third, will Olivia climb on board? She's just had a harrowing experience with representatives of the current administration. *Will she be willing to risk future reprisals by helping Alex and I turn up the protest heat?*

Chapter 15 – Hurt Again?

When I went to bed, I was still thinking about Alex. *Why is he being so tentative about taking our relationship to a new level? Is there something he's not telling me?* When Olivia returns, I'll ask her about Alex's tentativeness and see what she thinks about Alex and I seeing each other. I know she and I are close, and she might not appreciate *him* horning in on our relationship. She can be a little "possessive" at times.

*

When I hit the hay, I tossed and turned, asking myself, "Do I really want a romantic relationship? After my marriage ended, I had sworn off dating, I had sworn off men.

Sure, it was nice to be comforted and consoled by Alex. It made me feel close to a man again. But what would happen if we had a conflict? How would *I* react to conflict?

Also, I like my autonomy. Being able to go where and when I want to go, do what I want to do, without having to compromise. I eventually fell asleep, but the questions lingered.

Am I ready to establish another relationship?

Am I going to get hurt again?

Chapter 16 – Hiel POTUS

The following morning, as I awaited Olivia's return, I continued perusing my immigration files.

While doing so, I came across a snippet of something POTUS had said when running for president that was truly disturbing. POTUS promised that if elected, it meant he would have a *mandate to deport immigrants*. During his campaign, he repeatedly described immigrants as "*poisoning the blood of our country*." As an Assistant Professor of History, I knew exactly where I had heard that phrase before: *Adolph Hitler*.
This phrase is manifest hatred. The phrase can be found in abundance in Hitler's writings and speeches. He used his "*pure blood*" argument to target the Jews during World War II, claiming in "*Mein Kampf*" that the Jews were *contaminating the purity* of the Aryan race.

In this "*purification*" effort, Hitler was aided by close confidant Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi *Minister of Propaganda and Public Enlightenment* . He controlled nearly every aspect of public communication in Nazi Germany, including newspapers and magazines, film and theater, art and literature, public rallies and messaging, and the censorship and suppression of dissent.
His job was to shape public opinion, glorify Hitler, and dehumanize targeted groups, especially Jews.

What POTUS is up to, taking our country in this direction, is some scary Nazi shit..., I thought.

*

I thought back to an advertisement that our POTUS used to run when campaigning. I found the URL and viewed it. It was pure, unadulterated, Nazi propaganda. It described a murder by an undocumented immigrant from Venezuela, *José Antonio Ibarra*, who had, by the way, been previously detained and released by Biden immigration authorities. The POTUS propaganda machine really hit on that theme.

Ibarra had been apprehended, tried, and convicted of the murder of Laken Riley, a 22-year-old nursing student who was killed while jogging near the *University of Georgia*.

The ad was intended to blame the Democrats for allowing open borders and allowing criminals into the United States. Some of that blame is deserved! But the bigger picture message was also clear: *Immigrants are not like us — they're dangerous people who don't belong here.*

I continued watching the ad. It brought in Laken's mother, evoking the pain of losing her daughter. Of course, I emphasized with Laken's mother — everybody did. What a horrific, heartbreaking, devastating, tragic situation. I would even flip the switch for the electric chair for Laken's murderer, if given the chance.

But real purpose of the POTUS commercial echoed with me: *all immigrants are murderers, rapists, and mentally deranged aliens who are endangering our way of life. And I'm the only one who can be trusted to deal harshly with these criminals...*

The ad worked. It pinned the immigration problem on Democrats, and it stoked hatred of *all* immigrants, just as it was intended. It scapegoated immigrants. It was textbook propaganda at its finest...

*

How do the American people feel about the POTUS's capture and imprisonment approach to immigration control? At this point in time, the majority of those surveyed are not buying it:

- 58% of Americans oppose the use of detention facilities to hold people targeted for deportation.
- 54% say ICE's actions have "gone too far", according to a PBS/NPR/Marist poll.
- Only 42% support the detention strategy, and just 18% think immigration enforcement is "not tough enough".
- Support is high among Republicans, especially those who believe the program targets dangerous criminals.
- However, independents and Democrats overwhelmingly disapprove, with 83% of Democrats and 59% of independents saying ICE has gone too far.

Chapter 17 – The Flight Home

As my plane lifted off from Los Angeles and pointed toward Bangor, I replayed my UCLA interview in my mind. It had gone remarkably well — helped, no doubt, by the recent attention Mary and I had received for our student protest work around DEI issues. That job felt promising. Still, I had other possibilities simmering, other teaching roles to chase.

Somewhere between the Pacific and the Rockies, another thought crept in: *Could I convince Mary to move to California with me?*

*

There are no direct flights from Los Angeles to Bangor, Maine. You're funneled through Detroit, Philadelphia, or Chicago, and if the travel gods smile on you, after the delays and waiting, you're home in nine hours — just enough time to sink into a good book.

While downtown in L.A., I'd wandered into *The Last Bookstore*, a cavernous maze of "*previously loved*" volumes. I picked up a few history books I thought Mary would enjoy. Then, in the $1 bargain bin, I stumbled on something unexpected: "*Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*" by Arlie Russell Hochschild.

I flipped through it. Dozens of interviews with conservative Louisianans — churchgoers, workers, community members. Hochschild was trying to understand their frustrations, their loyalties, their sense of betrayal. It was published nearly a decade ago, but it felt strangely timely. I bought it, unaware of the surprise waiting inside.

*

Hochschild's book tries to explain why many voters support the current right-wing conservative agenda. She relies on first-person accounts from conservative voters who feel burdened by regulation, ignored by government, and threatened by cultural change. These concerns — economic, religious, regulatory — shape their political choices. For anyone trying to understand conservative motivations, the book is a treasure trove.

Professor Hochschild, Professor Emerita of Sociology at the *University of California, Berkeley*, conducted her in a region battered by hurricanes, industrial pollution, and chemical disasters. Yet, the people in this region are deeply resistant to government aid and government "interference."

She highlighted the "*Great Paradox*" as she opened her book: *why people vote against policies that might materially help them.*

In Chapter 1, she speaks with a former oil worker whose town has been devastated, yet he still supports candidates who oppose federal aid.

In Chapter 2, she meets a retired pipefitter who once illegally dumped toxic waste, later became an environmentalist, and still rejects regulation. Without rules, how do you prevent the very harm he now regrets?

Later, she interviews the Areno family — Evangelical Christians who mourn environmental destruction *but vote Republican because of cultural and religious alignment*. Again, the paradox: they oppose the very policies that could address their concerns and improve their standard of living.

*

Reading this, I remembered an article I'd once read about Louisiana's "*Cancer Alley*" — an 85-mile industrial corridor between Baton Rouge and New Orleans that emits staggering levels of carcinogens. Despite this, voters in the region consistently support candidates who oppose environmental regulation. It seems almost ingrained, a cultural reflex.

I thought about recent political decisions rolling back climate policies and declaring a "national energy emergency" centered on fossil fuels. I thought about family budgets in these communities — often stretched thin — and how disruptions to supply chains can raise costs and fuel inflation.

As I read interview after interview, I kept asking myself: *Why vote against your own economic self-interest?* It just seemed

incredulous. Why not support a government that is willing to directly address your issues with social programs and financial support?

*

Part Two, "*The Social Terrain*," introduces a politician enthusiastic about petrochemical expansion. Others express deep skepticism toward government oversight, preferring church-based charity and personal responsibility. These conversations were revealing — less about policy — than about worldview.

Part Three, "*The Deep Story*," was about how voters perceive themselves. Hochschild outlines emotional archetypes — the team player, the worshiper, the cowboy, the rebel — and shows how these identities shape political choices. It's not just logic; it's narrative, belonging, and self-understanding.

Part Four, "*Going National*," traces historical grievances — from *Civil War Reconstruction* to the *Civil Rights era* — grievances that still shape our country's political identity today. The book ends on a hopeful note, imagining a future where conservatives and progressives might bridge the communications divide.

*

To me, however, the most compelling part of Hothschild's book was when she introduced a sobering idea: the *Empathy Wall*. Liberals and conservatives, she argues, have become so culturally distant that they can barely understand each other. It's as if they speak different languages. She asks: *How do you communicate across that divide? How do you scale that wall?*

*

I did not know as I read this section of the Hothschild book that I would soon embark on a mission to open-up cross-party communications lines. I, too, wanted to find a way to scale the *Empathy Wall*.

Chapter 18 – The American Dream

As I continued to read "*Strangers in Their Own Land*," I finally figured out the root cause of conservative frustration with the U.S. federal government. Many of these Republican voters feel stuck in line, waiting for their turn at the *American Dream*. The *Dream* promises upward mobility through hard work — homeownership, financial security, material comfort, a good education leading to a good job.

When that dream feels out of reach, some blame what they see as liberal condescension or misplaced government generosity. They believe that "*elites*" have diverted resources to people they view as undeserving — those who are unemployed, chronically ill, immigrants, minorities. In their view, these "special" groups are blocking their path to the *Dream*. They argue that charity should come from churches, not government programs. This echoes earlier eras in American history — most notably Herbert Hoover's response to the *Great Depression*, when federal intervention was dismissed in favor of private charity. Incidentally, Hoover's administration also instrumented punitive tariffs that did significant damage to the economy...

Why does this sound vaguely familiar?

The Hoover position, that private charities should assume the mantel of caring for the poor, is still a bone of contention today. Conservative right wingers believe that he government should not be in the business of caring for the poor, the physically disadvantaged, the mentally-challenged. This core belief serves to fuel the MAGA movement. This debate continues today — with MAGA voters strongly opposed to government social welfare programs.

Hoover's successor, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, however, believed the opposite — that it was the government's responsibility to care for its needy citizens. It was under the FDR administration, for instance, that the social safety net, *Social Security*, was created.

*

In the end, as I closed the book somewhere over the New York state, the emotional logic of right-wing populism came into focus: *many conservatives vote Republican because they believe progressive policies undermine their path to the American Dream.* That belief — rooted in identity, history, and emotion — shapes their politics far more than any spreadsheet of economic benefits ever could.

In short, my key takeaway from this book was that Hothschild's conclusion that the source of the divide between Republicans and Democrats has to do with achieving the American Dream was spot on. Republican MAGA voters want a government that is not responsible for social welfare. They see social welfare as favoring minority groups at their expense. While "progressive" liberal Democrats "elites" want a government to care for its people, and hence favor special treatment of minorities, and social welfare programs. Polar opposites...

Chapter 19 – The Big Eye-Opener

As I flew over Vermont, or maybe it was New Hampshire, I was still thinking about the perception that minorities are blocking the conservatives from achieving their American Dream. And, as I reflected on this line of thought, *a key insight hit me pursuant to our DEI protests*. Both Mary and I had failed to understand why this current administration is so anti-LGBTQ+. I had blamed churches for treating us like aberrants — some do, others are more progressive and try to cut us some slack. But there is more to this LGBTQ+ hatred than just religious beliefs.

IN THE HOTHSCHILD BOOK *WE MADE THE LIST*. CONSERVATIVES HATE US MEMBERS OF THE LGBTQ+ MOVEMENT BECAUSE WE ARE BEING GIVEN ADVANTAGES SUCH AS DEI PROTECTIONS — WE'RE BEING TREATED "SPECIAL" BY AN UNTRUST-WORTHY WOKE GOVERNMENT. WE'RE IN THE WAY OF THEIR PERFECT, HOMOGENOUS AMERICA. WE'RE IN THE WAY OF THEIR AMERICAN DREAM.

This insight blew me away. Suddenly, the conservative point of view made a great deal more sense to me. We LGBTQ+ people are blocking conservatives from achieving their American Dream.

I now "*get it*." I couldn't wait to tell Mary about this finding. And, I couldn't wait to do a reality TV show about it...

Chapter 20 – Maine Interviews Reconsidered

As my plane approached Bangor, I reflected on interviews that I had conducted during the Summer of 2024 with conservative voters in Maine. There were about eight themes that I kept hearing when I interviewed Maine conservative voters.

1. *America is in decline*. A new government will restore prosperity. Globalization, immigration, and liberal cultural shifts have weakened American identity, industry, and values.
2. *Only a strong leader can rescue the nation* from elites, foreign powers, and media hostility.
3. *The government is rigged*, and a new leader will "unrig" it.
4. *Anyone who disagrees is an enemy* — media, academia, and even government agencies are biased against conservatives.
5. *The system is politically persecuting the President*; liberals manufacture his scandals and legal troubles.
6. *Tariffs, deregulation, and "America First" policies will protect American jobs and industries*.
7. *American culture is under threat* from LGBTQ+ people, immigrants, non-Christian religions, and the "liberal elite."
8. *The President is infallible and deserves unwavering loyalty.* Criticism is either exaggerated or unjustified.

But, after reading Hothschild's book, I reconsidered those interviews and looked at them in a new light. I think that what my MAGA interviewees were really saying is that they want the current government torn down, and that they believed that a strong leader can make that happen. They want a government that doesn't favor ethnic and gender groups — they want those groups out of their way on their quest to realize their American Dream.

My Christian Nationalist interviewees added a new twist — they want the American government to be run with Christian doctrine underpinnings.

And all of this stuff about how their leader has been politically persecuted and deserves blind allegiance — this is a call for a ruler, a king — an authoritarian.

*

How can this situation be reasonably corrected?, I pondered. *It is hard to argue with people who have unfounded beliefs, like the presidential election in 2020 was "fixed" by the Democrats... This fiction has been closely scrutinized by investigators, and they can prove that the election was not tampered with. But the conspiracy theorists and extreme right Republican conservatives just won't listen.*

Other evidence suggests that the current POTUS may have actually committed crimes. Epstein. National secrets in an unsecured bathroom. And more... *But I guess that in the minds of his believers, he can do no wrong.*

Ignoring these truths, and favoring a single, powerful leader means that roughly 40% of our country, the ones who approve of POTUS's actions, want a dictator as president. A dictator who might change the country into a conservative Christian nation built on the principle of white supremacy.

That's not the America I want to live in...

*

But wait. Hothschild has advised that the way to bridge the gap between the America the MAGA and Christian Nationalists want, and the America that most Democrats and Independents want is through empathy. Perhaps the these far right conservatives have a point: the America that we now live in has become polarized. It's not working well for the American people. Congress is partisan; the Supreme Court is far too conservative for the taste of most Americans; and POTUS is dysfunctional. Perhaps our government is in need of a complete remake in order to get it working again for the people.

I'll have to spend some time considering the alternative form of government I'd like to see replace the current one...

Chapter 21 – The American Dream

As a political science professor, I am aware of demographic studies by the *U.S. Census Bureau* that shows that in about 2043, only eighteen years from now, white Americans will fall below the 50% mark in terms of population. Other demographic prognosticators estimate that white American will dip below the 50% population mark a few years later, in 2045. Regardless of which studies you choose to believe, is there a real fear in white America that the white way of life is changing — and white Americans don't like the prospect of having people of other ethnicities in the majority? Are white Americans afraid that they will no longer be the *single* majority?

What these changing demographics really mean, I had long ago determined, is that our country will eventually have to become *pluralistic*, with several large racial and ethnic groups and no single majority. Some white Americans have chosen to fight this racial and ethnic shift, hence the focus on ethnic "*cleansing*." The current U.S. immigration policy is one means of providing this ethnic cleansing...

*

I went from considering this "macro" view of the America to a more local view. I considered what I had learned by talking to voters up in Washington and Aroostook counties, the easternmost and northernmost counties in Maine. These are sparsely populated counties, and the people there have a frontier-like way of looking at government.

I distinctly remember talking with a construction worker up in Perry, Maine, a guy who was wearing a MAGA hat. He was a nice guy, very accommodating, and willing to engage in a non-charged political discussion, even though he was very pro-POTUS.

I asked him why he voted for POTUS the first time, and whether he would vote for that same POTUS again. His response: "Up here we love our guns, and we don't want no government buttin' into our business. POTUS will protect our gun rights." In essence, he was saying that he feels that liberal governments would

try to interfere with his gun rights.

I then asked: "*Democrats are known for their generous social welfare programs, for their support of universal healthcare, and their advocacy for higher wages and labor rights. So, with so many people on welfare here in Washington County, why is it that so few up here vote Democrat*?"

"Ain't no one starvin' up here," came his response. "We all take care of each other. We're a resilient people. We all find ways to make a living. Sure, it would be nice to have more businesses up here — but it is what it is, and we all get by."

In other words, making money is difficult in Aroostook and Washington Counties, but the locals find ways to make ends meet. And, they believe that POTUS has their economic well-being in mind. They believe the POTUS will look out for their well-being with his promises to lower their grocery and energy costs.

*

Did I hear any concerns about immigrants? The answer is: "no." When I asked about the immigrant situation in northern and Downeast Maine, one guy told me: "*If they don't come, who is going to pick the blueberries?*"

*

As my plane landed in Bangor, I thought about my arrest in L.A.; about how the political situation in America has become so acerbic. I also thought about the voting habits of the people of Maine with whom I live. I became distraught.

Chapter 22 – Our New "Cause"

I could tell that Mary was relieved to see me as I entered the front door of my home. She was standing there waiting for me, two glasses half-filled with wine — one for her and one for me. "I'm so happy you've made it home safely," she announced as she handed me one of those glasses. She then toasted my return. She looked genuinely relieved that I had returned safely. And, I was happy and thrilled to see her, too.

*

We talked a bit about my Los Angeles trip, but I made a concerted effort to steer the conversation away from my incarceration so that I could avoid setting off her battered woman syndrome. I told her about the job interview. I told her about the massive bookstore that I had found, and I presented her with the two antiquarian history books that I had purchased as gifts for her. She was thrilled and most appreciative of my gifts, especially pleased with the leather-bound "*The Frontier in American History*" by Frederick Jackson Turner. After thanking me profusely, however, she, yet again, steered the conversation back to the immigration situation. And she eventually told me why.

*

"I had a chat with Alex last night. We discussed what had happened to you in Los Angeles during the immigration protest, and Alex thinks what happened to you is very newsworthy. He wants to interview you as soon as possible."

"I'll give him a call tonight, after I wind down from this trip, and see what he wants," I replied.

"And there's something more," Mary added. "Alex and I think we've found a new protest opportunity. Our push to get student participation in the *No Kings* movement over the DEI issue has been extremely well received, but Alex and I see protests on U.S. immigration policy as our *next big thing*. He wants to shoot more videos and write more stories about the current U.S. immigration debacle."

"You're not going to believe this," I replied, smiling, "But I was thinking the exact same thing. Only we should position the

immigrant situation as a reflection of a white America afraid of losing its current majority hold on our country."

I paused, then further described my thoughts. "I'd like to produce some videos that show that we fully understand the conservative point of view. This book," I said as I handed Mary my copy of *Strangers*, "explains why conservatives are voting the way they do. We need to demonstrate empathy for their position and show them that we understand why they voted the way they did. Then we need to present them with facts about what is happening — and show them how they are being lied to. We need to focus on the effects their decisions are having on real people including LGBTQ+ people and the immigrant community — we need to put human faces in front of them and get them to understand the pain they are causing others."

"You think that if we show them that we understand them, they might be willing to listen to some alternate positions?" Mary dubiously responded.

"I think we need to show conservative voters that LGBTQ+ people are no threat to them, and that immigrants are not stealing their jobs, that immigrants are a vital part of our community."

I paused to gauge Mary's reaction to my idea. Her body language indicated she was buying it.

I continued: "We need to demonstrate that immigrants are not all criminals or threats to national security. And we need to hammer home that the way they are being treated is *un-American*. We need to show them that they are being lied to by the current government."

"In that Hochschild book," I said as I gestured at the book, "She discusses something called the '*Empathy Wall*.' Look it over and tell me what you think. Basically, it suggests that the way to open communications with right-wing conservatives is to empathize with their worldview. If we can do that and show them how the current administration is lying to them, we may be able to make some inroads and win some hearts and minds to back our cause."

Chapter 23 – Alex's Research

While Mary and Olivia discussed various themes for immigration videos, I was at my PCPTV office doing some further research on immigration. I needed facts and figures to prepare an introductory video on the immigration deportation crisis. With that information I could then construct my video shoot.

*

I used my AI engine, Microsoft *Copilot*, and asked a few simple questions.

What are the polls showing about how Americans feel about ICE's treatment of immigrants?

The Copilot response: "Recent polling paints a complex but increasingly critical picture of how Americans view ICE's treatment of immigrants, especially under the administration's ramped-up deportation policies."

Copilot continued:

- Majority Say ICE Has Gone Too Far — - 54% of U.S. adults say ICE's actions have "gone too far" in enforcing immigration laws.
- Only 18% believe ICE hasn't gone far enough, while 26% say its actions are "about right."
- Among Democrats, a striking 83% say ICE has gone too far.
- 59% of independents agree [enforcement has gone too far.]

On ICE favorability, Copilot relayed that ICE favorability is dropping:

- ICE's net favorability rating recently flipped to -5 points (42% favorable vs. 47% unfavorable), down from +2 just a week earlier.
- (This shift coincides with mass protests and controversial raids, including military deployments to cities like Los Angeles).

Copilot continued, reporting major concerns about the treatment of the children of immigrants:

- Reports of DNA collection from minors, masked agents detaining people, and high deportation rates for children have sparked outrage.
- A CBS poll found 58% oppose how Trump is using detention facilities for migrants.

Copilot's responses pushed me to think more broadly about deportation and the shifting public mood around it. What struck me was how easily these exchanges could be turned into a narrative sequence. Each answer felt like the seed of a short video: one on ICE's falling approval ratings, another on the psychological toll of child detentions, another on the country's conflicted feelings about deportation itself. A whole series was practically writing itself.

Once I wrapped up my research, I was ready to move. The central insight that emerged was simple but powerful: Americans want secure borders, but they don't want a system that is cruel, chaotic, or punishes people far beyond what their circumstances warrant. That tension mirrored my own feelings almost exactly. With that in mind, I sketched out the structure for my video series. But before finalizing it, I had one more question for Copilot—one that cut to the heart of the entire project: *Why are mass deportations taking place in the United States?*

The response was blunt: mass deportations aren't just about enforcing immigration law. They're driven by political strategy, legal precedent, and ideological narratives about identity, economics, and fear. In other words, the machinery of deportation reflects deeper anxieties about who belongs in America and who gets to decide.

Later, I brought that question to Mary and the Professor, hoping their perspectives might help me trace the roots of the government's increasingly extreme approach. Their insights did indeed help me shape the next phase of the project.

Chapter 24 – Checking with PCPTV Los Angeles

The parent company of my employer, PCPTV, is privately funded *Epoch Nexus Media Group*. Epoch Nexus has launched and staffed thirty-seven digital-first online stations across thirty states to date. Some states, such as California, have two or three Epoch Nexus stations due to their city sizes and geographic distribution. For example, California has Epoch Nexus news outlets in Sacramento, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. Some states have dense news reporting teams, with Washington, D.C., funding nine reporters, and New York City funding six.

Having access to a network of reporters helps me cover the news. I needed to talk with some of our reporters in Los Angeles who had covered the recent protests, or as the Fed calls them: "riots." I needed clarification on the police's role in protest control, the National Guard's activities, and the Marines' responsibilities.

*

Ted Asner is my general manager at PCPTV. He supervises operations and sets the station's strategic direction. Warren P. Lebold, the programming director, is responsible for selecting and scheduling content clips. He functions as the station's managing editor. I asked Warren to call his Los Angeles counterpart and pave the way for me to ask the local reporters some questions. He asked "why?", heard my explanation, understood my requirements, and did so.

The PCPTV Los Angeles program director is Michael Flaherty — known as "MF" by his reporters. MF paved the way for me to ask my fellow reporters a few questions regarding the protests and the general behavior of ICE. These guys had gone heavily into covering *ICE*, the *National Guard* activities, the *Marine* activities, and the California politician responses to Federal Government interference. They were killing it in the ratings — quick, accurate, informed news at everyone's fingertips.

I got my answers on the various roles of the police, the National Guard, and the Marines. But I wanted to know what was happening with the Los Angeles captured detainees, and I sought information on what happened to the over 300 protestors who

were arrested. I wanted to establish a relationship with my Los Angeles counterparts such that we could share stories, ideas, and videos in the future.

*

The most valuable piece of advice they gave me was: "Go to https://locator.ice.gov/odls/#/search if you're trying to locate detainees. ICE tallies all of its captures and details where they are sending their prisoners on this open-to-the-public website.
I didn't take up too much of their time, which I'm sure they appreciated. I told them what I was about to do for immigrant deportation coverage — they liked what I was planning and pledged their support. I managed to establish a working relationship with a few of those guys, which means they'd return my calls if I reach out to them.

Chapter 25 – Online Detainee Locator System

Invaluable!

When I landed on the ICE homepage, I found options for news, enforcement details, and public services.

And then I located the "*Online Detainee Locator System (ODLS).*

The *Online Detainee Locator System* site is a treasure trove of information. It lists who was captured and what has been done with them. I couldn't believe my eyes. Transparency! It was not at all what I was expecting from the current regime.

The ICE site for the Los Angeles/California area lists prisoner captures, it indicates the number of prisoners over the age of 18; prisoner; it provides mission statements; and describes some operating procedures. For us reporters, it's an easy-to-use, "content-rich" website!

*

I hovered over "*Detainee Information,*" clicked on it, and found my way to https://locator.ice.gov.

Now on the locator page, I chose a search method. I could use the "*Alien Registration Number*" to search by country of birth, name, or date of birth. I entered: "*Jose Gonzales.*" The equivalent of "*John Smith*" in English.

Next thing I knew, I had six hits. I reviewed them and found the facilities in which they were being held, including their current detention location and contact info. This whole process was amazingly easy!

*

But wait, there's more...

On the ICE website home page at https://www.ice.gov/, there were page links:

- *Who We Are*
- *What We Do*

- *Newsroom*
- *Information Library*
- *Contact ICE*

I was intrigued by their "*getting to know you*" categories, so I clicked on each page link. And this is what I found:

Who We Are:

> *ICE was created in 2003 through a merger of the investigative and interior enforcement elements of the former U.S. Customs Service and the Immigration and Naturalization Service. ICE now has more than 20,000 law enforcement and support personnel in more than 400 offices in the United States and around the world.*

The agency has an annual budget of approximately $8 billion, primarily devoted to three operational directorates — *Homeland Security Investigations* (HSI), *Enforcement and Removal Operations* (ERO) and *Office of the Principal Legal Advisor* (OPLA). A fourth directorate — *Management and Administration* (M&A) — supports the three operational branches to advance the ICE mission.

*

The site also detailed what each operational directorate did:
The *Enforcement and Removal Operations* (ERO) directorate upholds U.S. immigration law at, within, and beyond our borders. ERO's work is critical to the enforcement of immigration law against those who present a danger to our national security, are a threat to public safety, or otherwise undermine the integrity of our immigration system.

ERO operations target public safety threats, such as convicted criminals, undocumented aliens and gang members, as well as individuals who have otherwise violated our nation's immigration laws, including those who illegally re-entered the country after being removed and immigration fugitives ordered removed by federal immigration judges. ERO deportation officers assigned to INTERPOL also assist in targeting and apprehending foreign

fugitives or Fugitive Arrest and Removal (FAR) cases who are wanted for crimes committed abroad and who are now at large in the U.S.

And, finally, ERO manages all aspects of the immigration enforcement process, including identification and arrest, domestic transportation, detention, bond management, and supervised release, including alternatives to incarceration. In addition, ERO removes undocumented aliens and ships them to more than 150 countries around the world. I think these are the people who show up in masks and detain immigrants.

*

Then there was: *Homeland Security Investigations* (HSI) is the principal investigative component of DHS and is responsible for investigating, disrupting, and dismantling transnational criminal organizations (TCOs) and terrorist networks that threaten or seek to exploit the customs and immigration laws of the United States. Its workforce consists of more than 8,700 employees, including special agents, criminal analysts, mission support personnel and contract staff assigned to more than 237 offices across the United States and more than 93 offices around the world.

HSI has broad legal authority to conduct federal criminal investigations into the illegal cross-border movement of people, goods, money, technology and other contraband throughout the United States. HSI utilizes these authorities to investigate a wide array of transnational crime, including terrorism; national security threats; narcotics smuggling; transnational gang activity; child exploitation; human smuggling and trafficking; illegal exports of controlled technology and weapons; money laundering; financial fraud and scams; worksite and employment crimes; cybercrime; intellectual property theft and trade fraud; identity and benefit fraud; human rights violations and war crimes.

In collaboration with its strategic partners in the U.S. and abroad, HSI special agents gather evidence to identify and build criminal cases against TCOs, terrorist networks and facilitators, and other criminal elements that threaten the United States. HSI works with prosecutors to indict and arrest violators, execute criminal search

warrants, seize criminally derived money and assets, and take other actions designed to disrupt and dismantle criminal organizations operating around the world. These efforts protect U.S. national, border, and economic security, and ensure the safety of the public and our communities.

These guys are being used as the tattle-tails. They perform numerous vital functions that help secure our country from terrorists. But they also help gather intelligence that helps ICE target and locate immigrants.

*

And finally, there is the *Management and Administration* directorate.

> *The M&A directorate makes important contributions to the ICE mission by providing the vital infrastructure necessary for successful ICE operations. M&A identifies and tracks the agency's performance measurements and leads a dynamic human capital program that includes aggressive recruitment endeavors and commitment to equal employment opportunity. It coordinates ICE's administrative and managerial functions to address the needs of the ICE mission, while helping to guide the dynamic growth and future of the agency.*
>
> *M&A directs and maintains ICE's budget, expenditures, accounting and finance, procurement, facilities, property, and policy and privacy programs in full compliance with Federal laws, regulations, and rules. M&A provides a solid integrated information technology infrastructure to ensure the men and women of ICE have the tools they need to succeed. M&A establishes acquisition strategies, oversees procurement activities and contracts, and executes sound and cost-effective financial management policies, standards, and systems. In addition, M&A ensures collaboration with internal stakeholders to increase diversity, guarantees timely responses to Freedom of Information Act requests and supports the agency's training needs.*

These guys are ICE's strategic planners and bean-counters. There were several other "offices" listed in M&A, including the *Office of the Chief Financial Officer*, the *Office of the Chief Legal Advisor*, and the *Office of Professional Responsibility* — which I find to be an oxymoron given their mission statement "*to vigilantly manage ICE's security programs, conduct independent reviews of ICE programs and operations, and impartially investigate allegations of serious employee and contractor misconduct, as well as internal and external threats against ICE personnel and facilities.*"

*

I think they misspelled *vigilantly* — it should have been "we are the "*vigilantes*" who do this," because I'm not convinced that kidnapping people and denying them their habeas corpus rights is truly legal.

And I loved their use of the phrase "*impartially investigate*." In my view, this whole process is far from "*impartial*." Impartial means "*not biased or not favoring one side over another*." I don't see any impartiality in the treatment of captured immigrants. ICE is doing precisely what they've been hired to do — kidnap people and ship them to prison — impartiality be damned...

*

To cap off my site visit, I clicked on their revolving "*About Us*" page that features a section called "*The Worst of the Worst.*" "*Ever Wonder Who Ice Agents Are? Check out our latest high-profile and worst-of-the-worst arrests to get a closer look at the criminal aliens we've taken into custody...*"

I happen to know that based on the most recent data, only about 7–8% of ICE detainees nationwide have been convicted of violent crimes. So I have a suggestion for ICE. How about creating a page that says: "And here are the other 92% of the detainees who have committed no crimes other than being undocumented and who are now in prison serving interminable prison sentences."

Chapter 26 – The Future of ICE

While on this ICE site, I was particularly amused by a department's claim that it is "*helping to guide the dynamic growth and future of the agency.*"

"Dynamic growth?" What does that even mean?

I suspect that we already know what the future of this agency is:

1. Grow very large,
2. Spend a lot of money,
3. Create a very large security police force that can be used to drive other initiatives besides immigration enforcement, like, for instance, *dissidence repression.*

*

I couldn't help myself. I had to ask my AI companion the following question: "*How did the Soviet Union's KGB start?*" What I learned was that the KGB, or *Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti* (*Committee for State Security*), was officially established on March 13, 1954. Still, its roots stretch back to the earliest days of the Soviet Union.

In 1917, just after the Bolshevik Revolution, Vladimir Lenin created the Cheka — an *all-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counterrevolution and Sabotage.*

Cheka was the first instantiation of the Soviet Union's secret police. And my AI assistant pointed out that it was "*tasked with crushing opposition and protecting the revolution.*"

My, does that sound ominous...

From the 1920s through the 1950s, when Stalin was in power, several other secret police organizations were created. Their purposes were to conduct mass surveillance, carry out purges, and exercise political repression.

This should come as a shock to no one, but it should be readily apparent that ICE is already surveilling Americans as it searches

for undocumented aliens. And placing undocumented aliens, particularly Hispanics, in prisons is clearly a purge. What we haven't seen is ICE being used to exercise political repression. But I have to wonder: *When we've successfully purged-out all illegal aliens in the United States, are we just going to let ICE agents go? Or could they be reassigned to repress opposition to the regime that is running the government?*

*

In 1954, after Stalin's death, Nikita Khrushchev became the Premier of the Soviet Union. And it was he who formed the KGB to restructure the country's security apparatus.
The KGB was responsible for:

1. Foreign intelligence
2. Domestic counterintelligence
3. Surveillance of dissidents
4. Border security
5. Protection of political leadership

In the U.S.: the *Central Intelligence Agency* is responsible for foreign intelligence.

- The *Department of Homeland Security* is responsible for domestic counterintelligence, monitoring situations within our borders to detect, prevent, and neutralize espionage, sabotage, and other intelligence threats posed by foreign powers or hostile entities.
- The *Secret Service* is charged with the protection of political leadership.
- *U.S. Customs and Border Protection* is in charge of protecting our borders.
- Several departments in the U.S. are responsible for monitoring the activities of "dissidents." They include the *Federal Bureau of Investigation* (FBI), the *National Security Agency* (NSA), and the *Department of Homeland Security*.

But here's my concern about the last bullet point. The NSA collects massive amounts of data on individuals, often justifying this as a counterterrorism activity. But with all that data, it is feasible to create a surveillance state that can be used to go after dissenters?

Further, DHS is charged with aggregating intelligence from federal, state, and local sources. This agency has been accused of monitoring peaceful protests and activist groups under vague "threat classifications."

Perhaps I'm becoming a bit paranoid, but what if a regime took over the United States and chose to quash protestors and resistors? The mechanisms are all in place to allow this to happen. Might the massive ICE police force be weaponized against American citizens?"

Chapter 27 – Security Service Parallels

I needed to talk through my "paranoia" with people who actually understood history and political science. Where on earth could I find such a duo?

*

The Professor had just returned from Los Angeles. We'd spoken briefly the night she got back, and she invited me over to film a debrief about her experience. My video team and I recorded the interview in her living room, weaving in additional footage from our LA office to round out the story when we got back to the studio.

When we wrapped, I sent the team back to the office to start production. I stayed behind and joined Olivia and Mary at their dining room table.

"I've been digging into the history of government security agencies," I began. "And I've hit a wall. When I compare our national security apparatus to the old Soviet system — and to modern Russia — I see the same structural opportunities for surveillance of citizens. DHS, NSA, FBI... all of them have the capacity to monitor Americans. And I'm worried the current administration might use those tools against people they label as 'dissidents.' Meaning: anyone who disagrees with them."

Olivia didn't hesitate. "The parallels are unsettling. In Russia, the security state exists to protect the wealth and power of Putin and the oligarchs. The structure is similar here — the difference is supposed to be leadership motives. Our leadership is supposed to be focused on serving us — not themselves. But lately, those motives feel... compromised."

Mary cut in with a dry, razor-edged tone. "Oh, absolutely. In the U.S., it's definitely not about enriching the president and his friends."

Her sarcasm landed like a hammer. I got the point.

“Speaking of enrichment,” I said, “what about the ‘gift airplane’ from Qatar? A four-hundred-million-dollar jet. And if the government spends a billion modifying it for presidential use, who owns it when he leaves office? If it’s treated as a personal gift, he walks away with a $1.4 billion asset. That’s not a gift — that’s a fortune.”

Olivia leaned back, eyebrows raised. “And don’t forget the stablecoin project — USD1. His family’s company has billions in crypto investments. All while he’s in office. People are asking whether policy decisions are being shaped to benefit those holdings.”

Mary added her own example. “And the crypto-linked donations — tens of millions from major players in the industry. That’s a conflict of interest the size of a small planet.”

Olivia gave a theatrical shrug. “But no, no, none of this is about self-enrichment. Our president and his circle would never siphon billions from the public trough…”

The three of us sat in the silence that followed.

Hypocrites.

Chapter 28 – Retribution?

And then bad news arrived. The kind that punches you in the chest before you're fully awake. It hit hard the morning after Alex and I filmed the interview on my experience in LA.

It was about Manuel Candelaria, father of Tito, the student who runs our social media program. Tito's father!

The news shocked me. It angered me. It hollowed me out.

*

I've known Manuel for more than twenty years. He arrived in this country as a migrant produce picker, eventually drifting north to Maine during blueberry season. Through grit and long hours, he saved enough — and borrowed enough — to open his own shop. "*Manny's Produce*" became a Bangor institution. His fruits and vegetables always tasted as if they'd been plucked from the earth that morning. I've never once bought a bruised banana or a mushy tomato from him. Freshness was his religion.

Farmers love Manny because he bought much of his produce locally. Customers love Manny because he remembered their names and cracked jokes while weighing their apples. Charities loved him because he donated generously. Manny was woven into the fabric of this town.

*

That morning, Mary and I were at the breakfast table, working on a script for one of our new videos, when my phone erupted with the "fireworks" ringtone. Only one person used that tone: Alex. I answered and put him on speaker.

"Hello Alex, long time no see. You're on speaker — Mary's here."

His voice came through tight, strained. "Olivia, Mary... I've got some real bad news. Awful news! Employees at *Manny's Produce* say ICE just took Manny. They grabbed him at the store. I'm trying to find out where they've taken him."

Mary gasped. “Oh my God. Why him? What did he do?”
A bolt of disbelief shot through me. “NO!” The word tore out of me before I could stop it. “Why Manny? He’s respected. He’s a business owner. Why him?”

“That was my first question,” I said, trying to steady myself. “It appeared to be a targeted arrest. ICE usually targets criminals, gang members, or undocumented laborers in agriculture and construction. They don’t typically go after established business owners — especially ones beloved in the community. It’s bad publicity for them...”

“They clearly target Latinos,” I said flatly. “They profile Hispanics. Over three-quarters of ICE arrests are Hispanic. His ethnicity alone makes him a target.”

Mary leaned forward, jaw set. “We can’t just sit here. What can we do to get him released?”

“First, we need to know why they took him,” Alex said. “It could be a mistake. If it is, they’ll release him after questioning.”

“Or he’s undocumented,” I said quietly. “He came here as a migrant worker. Thousands crossed without papers. He may have been one of them.”

Alex exhaled sharply. “I’ve already called ICE. They say he’s not in the system yet. I have to wait until they process him.”

Mary’s voice dropped. “Can you find out how they found him? What triggered the arrest?” Her real question hung in the air: “Was this political?”

Alex didn’t dodge it. “If they have a stated reason, I’ll get it. But yes — I hear what you’re asking. Was this a targeted, politically motivated arrest?”

Olivia turned to Mary. “You’re wondering if they went after Manny because Tito is central to our *No Kings* student recruitment program?”

Mary didn't blink. "I'm wondering if they connected the dots. Tito's activism. Manny's name. And decided to make an example of Manny."

Alex added, "Workers told me ICE agents came specifically for Manny. It wasn't random. It was a hunt."

I folded my arms. "If he's undocumented, and if they linked him to Tito... this smells like retaliation."

"Has Tito been told?" I asked.

"The employees didn't have his number. I was hoping you did."

"I do," I said.

"Will *you* tell him?"

I hesitated, reluctant to become the bearer of bad news, then nodded. "I'll do it."

Mary placed a hand on my arm. "*We'll do it together.*"

Chapter 29 – Telling Tito

Mary dropped Tito a message asking where he was.

"In my apartment. Why, what's up?"

"We're in the neighborhood and would like to stop by, if that's convenient."

"Sure," he said, followed by "What's up?"

"We'll tell you when we get there — we're about fifteen minutes away."

"Okay, see you soon..."

It must be something exciting, Tito thought. *Otherwise, why would the Professor and Mary be coming to see me personally?*

*

"This is going to tear him apart," Mary declared, cognizant of the hurt we were about to deliver. "It's tearing me apart." She started crying.

"I know," I said, staying silent, considering what was about to unfold. Mary and I didn't say another word to each other until we arrived at Tito's apartment. We both contemplated how we were going to tell him. I had a lump in my throat — I, too, was on the verge of tears.

*

Tito greeted us at his front door as we arrived. It was obvious immediately that we were both upset — Mary's teary eyes were a dead give-away. And Tito read the look of concern on my face.

Tito's demeanor changed immediately. "What's going on?" Tito asked, with a hint of tension in his voice.

"May we come in?" I asked.

Tito looked confused as he held the door for us and we made our

way to his living room. He knew instinctively that something bad had happened.

"Tito, we all need to sit down," Mary opened, and we all found a seat.

"Tito, we have some very bad news. Your father — he's been arrested by ICE," Mary started.

I added, "Alex is trying to track down what has happened to him — but, for now, we believe he is being held in a local ICE detention center."

Tito's expression twisted into a mix of shock and outrage. "Oh my God," he blurted, "are you telling me they took him?"

Mary, starting to well-up again, affirmed "Apparently so, Tito. We're still trying to track him down."

"Have they hurt him?" Tito asked, still absorbing the shock.

We didn't answer that question. We had no idea what the exact status of Manny was. We both knew the next questions Tito would ask.

Tito's voice came out tight and searching, his brows drawn together. "Why? Why him? What could he possibly have done to deserve this?"

"Tito, your father is not just another arrest, he is a pillar of the community," I affirmed. "And we're going to get to the bottom of what motivated his arrest," I stated with conviction.

"It makes no sense," Tito angrily replied. "He's a good man; an honest man; a huge contributor to our community. Why would they choose him?"

Then my words "motivated his arrest" hit Tito, just as it had hit us — retribution.

"They targeted him, didn't they? This is some form of retribution."

"We don't know for sure," Mary said. "But we do find his arrest suspicious."

I had no idea how to respond. Tito was searching my eyes for a reveal. I revealed nothing, I had no answer. We all knew that a great injustice had just been done, and we all suspected that the reason was that the current administration believes that it has been given a mandate to physically remove undocumented immigrants from our country. And this injustice features the denial of *habeas corpus* and the denial of human rights. It is kidnapping on a grand scale, plain and simple...

"Was it because of my involvement in social media promoting your shows?" Tito finally asked.

I found my voice. "We suspect that the feds may have used that involvement as an excuse to target your father. Alex is trying to track down the reason for his arrest as we speak. What we do know is that ICE made a targeted arrest; they blocked all of the exits at his market; no one else was taken; and his name has not yet appeared in their tracking system."

"He's not documented," Tito sadly responded. "What can we do?"

"Well, the first thing we need to do," Mary volunteered, "Is to contact an immigration lawyer. Alex is pressing I for your father's location, once we know that, we can have a lawyer get in touch with him."

"They've captured him, and they're going to ship him away to prison," Tito declared, well aware of the ICE modus operandi. He knew lawyers were not going to affect Manny's situation much. He would be spirited away to a remote prison before a lawyer could be found to represent him.

Tito looked white as a ghost. The color had drained from his face; he was visibly shaking.

"I need some space," Tito declared. "I'm going outside for a few minutes." He had a pained expression on his face as he stood, exited through his rear sliding door, and stood in the backyard pacing.

He didn't cry. He clenched his fists as he tried to walk-off some of his tension. About fifteen minutes later he returned.

*

"I'm going on social media with this," he announced. "This is clearly retribution for all of us exercising our first amendment rights to free speech."

Just then Alex called — bringing us up-to-speed on what had transpired as he sought to track down Manny's location — and requesting an interview with Tito.

The social media campaign was about to begin...

*

The illegal apprehension of his father would change Tito's life forever. And worse was yet to come.

Chapter 30 – A Retribution Story

I had the elements of the story about what happened to Manny in my brain. I knew who I wanted to interview; I had already laid out the story that I wanted to tell. But the big question on my mind was whether PCPTV would allow me to aggressively cover this story. I needed to talk to Warren, my managing editor.

*

"Warren, I think this is going to be a big story," I intimated. "It's a *retribution* story. We've got a couple of professors rightly protesting the administration's DEI policies; we've got Tito helping to drive their DEI protests; and we've got eyewitness accounts of the arrest of one of the kindest, hard-working immigrants our community has ever known. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out what's going on."

Warren shook his head in disbelief. "This is the dirty, underhanded kind of activity we've come to expect from this administration." It took him only a moment to decide. "I want you to run with this immediately. Get on ICE and seek an explanation." He then added, "Did they arrest anyone else at the produce store?"

"As near as I can tell — not one."

"You need to go to the produce store and interview the employees. And you need to see if you can get Tito's reaction."

"I can pursue the ICE justification; I can get employee comments; but I'm not so sure about getting commentary from Tito. It depends on how much of a wreck he is after he learns what just happened."

We concluded our discussion with Warren's commitment to run our planned story by upper-level management. "If we're going to do this, and do it right, we're going to ruffle some federal feathers," Warren acknowledged. "I've got to let the big boys know in advance what we're up to..."

*

I got my video crew together and we're bounded over to the produce store. We got the employees' side of the story. Most of Manny's workers are locals, meaning "white." They told me that they had not been questioned. Manny, however, had two Hispanic employees who were questioned. They had their birth certificates and valid Maine licenses on them. ICE had to let them go. A lot of Spanish Americans carry proof of citizenship now. They know they're targets. My crew and I completed our interviews, then headed over to the Bangor ICE headquarters.

In Bangor, ICE has set-up shop at the *Northern Maine Regional Reentry Center* (NMRRC) over on Hogan Road. That is where I suspected that they may be holding Manny. From there, Manny would likely be transfered down to Southern Maine, to the *York County Jail* or the *Cumberland County Jail."*

I phoned, seeking to meet with ICE officials. They would not accommodate me. Because they refused to talk to me, I had my videographers set up just outside of the ICE facility — and I proceeded to tell the story of what I had learned so far — with the ICE building serving as a backdrop.

With the employee interviews completed, and with the ICE building in the background as I told my viewers how ICE was refusing to cooperate, the next interview I need to conduct was with Tito. I needed to get his reaction on camera for my viewers.

*

I knew Tito through his association with Olivia and Mary. He's a brilliant, hard-working student with a real knack for publicizing their reality show on social networks.

called Mary to ascertain whether Tito had been told about what had happened to his father.

"We're with Tito now," Mary informed me. "He's been told, and he's taking the news extremely hard."

This may appear heartless, but it's part of the job. "Mary," I probed, "Would it be possible to come over there and do an interview with Tito? I think the Bangor community would really appreciate hearing what the three of you have to say about this."

Mary hesitated. "What did you learn from ICE — and from Manny's employees?"

"Manny's employees said they felt it was a specifically targeted arrest. And ICE won't talk to me — at least not yet. But if I can get Tito on camera talking about the horror of this situation, that might make ICE step forward and be accountable."

Mary paused to check with Olivia and Tito. Both wanted an ICE explanation. And both agreed that pressure coming from family and friends might shake ICE loose.

"We're up at his apartment in Orono; I'll text you the address."

Chapter 31 – The Tito Interview

"There's his car!" Mary announced as she peered out Tito's apartment window, awaiting my arrival. She opened the front door and invited me in.

I saw Tito sitting on his couch, looking disconsolate. "Tito, I'm so sorry for this situation," I started. "I've been trying to contact ICE for your father's status — but to no avail. They're stonewalling me."

"I've also talked with his employees, and his capture appears to have been targeted. I'm ready to report that, too. But, to complete my story, I need to get reactions from his family and friends. Will you be willing to share your thoughts with me?"

"Mary and Olivia, and I, have decided to take this kidnapping to social media — so, yes, I'm more than willing to give you my thoughts."

"Fine, then, my videographers should be here shortly, then let's begin." My videographers arrived moments later and prepared for the shoot. But before we began shooting, I needed to ask Tito an important question that would have direct bearing on my story. "Tito," I whispered, "Does he have documentation?"

Tito went slackjawed. "No" was all he said.

*

Minutes later we started shooting.

"This is Tito Candelaria, son of local produce merchant Manny Candelaria, whom we believe has just been abducted by ICE in a raid at his market. Tito, can you share with us your reaction to what's going on?"

"My Pop said they weren't going to come after him," Tito said. "Pop said that they aren't pursuing businessmen, especially if there are no undocumented people in their employ. He was sure that ICE was not going to target a hardworking, successful, civic-minded person who does so much for his community."

Tito then slumped on the couch and put his hands to his face and continued. "I don't believe it; this can't be true. This can't be happening. This is my worst nightmare." Tito's jaw dropped, and his mouth was agape. His eyes widened. He looked shocked and surprised by the news.

Selfishly, this is the kind of tear-jerking reaction that strongly succeeds with viewers. The angst. The pain. What Tito was doing was going to have a big impact on viewers.

I then asked the tough question: "Tito, is there any document that we can use to prove that he has a right to be here?"

"There is nothing," Tito responded defensively. "He has nothing."

And then Tito dropped the retribution bomb. "They're trying to punish him in order to punish me. This is aimed at me for helping speak-out against the evils of the current administration against their DEI-rights denial. They've captured my father to punish me!"

After that Tito became agitated; it was clear that he could no longer continue with his interview. So I thanked him for speaking out about his father's kidnapping situation, and then we all packed-up and left for the studio. I had, at that point, exactly what I needed to create a compelling report.

*

The interview with Manny's produce market employees was graphic. "They took him," one of Manny's people told me. "They wrestled him to the ground. They cable-tied him around both wrists. And because he resisted, they tased him — while he was lying on the ground with his hands zip-tied behind his back."

Another employee spoke up. "Why would they do this to Manny. He's a good man. He works hard. He provides employment opportunities for us. He is generous with the charities. Why would they put such an honest man behind bars?"

I then worked in the shot of the prison, explaining how smug and entitled the ICE people are; how they refused to be interviewed; and where they would likely take Manny to "process" him.

*

We eventually found Manny in the system. He had indeed been taken to Southern Maine, where he was held for a few days. He was given prison garb; his head was shaven; and they slapped him on a flight down to Alexandria, Louisiana. From Alexandria, he was forced onto a deportation flight to San Salvador, carried there by *GlobalX Airlines*, a charter carrier contracted by the U.S. government for immigration enforcement purposes.

In San Salvador, he was taken to the most notorious, most feared prison in the whole immigration imprisonment system: CECOT.

Chapter 32 – CECOT and More

There they were in April, our POTUS and Nayib Bukele, the president of El Salvador, doing a joint interview for the national news media. They were sharing the stage and talking as if they were best buddies. POTUS described Bukele as "one hell of a president."

POTUS has worked a deal with the El Salvadorian president to house thousands of deported immigrants in Bukele's notoriously inhumane prison: CECOT. The POTUS administration started by deporting hundreds of men, many falsely labeled as gang members, to El Salvador. And, to make matters worse, POTUS also reportedly expressed interest in sending select American citizens convicted of violent crimes to Bukele's prison system. Americans sent to foreign prisons – what a novel idea...

*

CECOT stands for *Centro de Confinamiento del Terrorismo*, or *Terrorism Confinement Center* in English. The U.S. government has classified him, a produce store owner and manager, as a terrorist.

CECOT is located in Tecoluca, El Salvador, about 45 miles east of San Salvador. This "hell-hole" has been designed to hold up to 40,000 inmates. And El Salvador has indicated that it may be willing to build other prisons of this design, providing the POTUS administration is willing to fund those additional facilities to house hundreds of thousands of undocumented immigrants.

This prison does not allow family visits or access to legal counsel. There is limited outdoor access. Cells reportedly hold 65–100 prisoners each, with minimal privacy. Detainees sleep on metal bunks without mattresses or bedding. The smell of urine permeates the air. Sexual assaults are known to happen.

Venezuelan immigrants, who were swapped in a prisoner exchange with San Salvador, recently spoke to the media. They were well familiar with the prison, and claimed that torture and beatings are regular occurrences. Some prisoners are starving. And allegations of medical neglect have also surfaced.

Immigrant women prisoners are taken away from their families and held in detention centers in the United States. California, Colorado, Florida, New York, New Mexico, and Arizona. At some prisons, adult males and females, as well as minors, are imprisoned. Some of these prisons are mixed gender, others are gender segregated.

At the *Stewart Detention Center* in Georgia, at least five women reported being sexually assaulted by a male nurse during medical exams.

Nationwide Data from 2015 through 2021 shows that over 300 sexual abuse complaints were filed by immigrants in ICE detention centers. More than half of these were directed at staff, with some victims threatened with deportation if they spoke out.

A JAMA Study between 2018 and 2022 records that 922 sexual assault allegations were reported across 129 ICE facilities. Staff were responsible for nearly 30% of these, yet only 3.3% of staff-related claims were ever substantiated.

Chapter 33 – Our Protest Day

For the remainder of June, and into July, Tito, Alex, Mary and I produced video after video lamenting the loss of one of Bangor's most upstanding citizens to the cruelty of the POTUS regime. For the most part, the people of Bangor were appalled by the government's kidnapping of Manuel Candelaria. Some were still blindly loyal to the POTUS agenda, and freely criticized our reporting on social media.

The June nationwide polls showed that most Americans opposed the POTUS's immigration policy. 62% of those surveyed disapproved of the POTUS's approach to immigration, with 45% strongly disapproving.

Further, a record-high 79% of Americans said immigration is good for the country. I repeat, *immigrants are good for this country*. So why, with such a vast majority in favor of immigration, are we kidnapping and imprisoning immigrants? And only 30% of those surveyed want immigration reduced, which means 70% want it encouraged. There has to be a better way to handle this crisis!

Chapter 34 – A New Idea

Days later, Mary and I were sitting at our breakfast table when we got a call from Tito. He had reposted the Alex story about his father's kidnapping, and people from all over the country, and all over the world, were sympathetic with Manny's and Tito's plight.

"*Let's organize a protest day at Waterfront Park. We can make it a major event and voice our displeasure with what ICE has been doing to our community and our country. What do you think*?"

Mary pondered Tito's suggestion for about two seconds, then announced: "I love it! We can raise awareness in Maine about the government's brutal tactics and show the damage government immigration policies are doing to our community and the state of Maine as a whole. I strongly agree – let's do this!"

Mary then looked at me, waiting for my perspective.

Did I really want to get involved in hosting a rally?

I responded with a series of questions. "Here's the way I look at this idea. We need to consider the size of the turnout we can expect. Will counter-rallies be arguing in support of ICE policies? Will the police back us? Will they provide the security that we need to pull off this protest peaceably? We're going to need a lot of speakers – who can we get to support us?
Tito spoke up again. "I was thinking of a concert in favor of immigration policy change, instead of speakers. Speakers at rallies can be boring. But if you bring in artists like *Bad Bunny, Shakira, Ivan Cornejo, Chiquis, and Becky G* – all Latinos – who have come out opposing the U.S. immigration policy, we could draw quite a crowd."

"And they could be our spokespeople," Mary added.
I considered Tito's suggestion. He was right. "We have an audience of about fifty thousand students who support our DEI position – can we segue them into immigration policy opposition?
"I think we can," Tito asserted.

"Let's do this," Mary again stated. She really did love the idea. "Okay," I said. "Let's see if we can do this. Tito – start looking into getting musical support for our concert. Mary, you'll need to look into police security. I will take the sweatband of getting the city permits and reserving the amphitheater. And we're all going to need to start looking for sources of funding for this event. I'll try to get a handle on costs, but you two should also consider the cost of staging such an event. Tito, can you find a concert promoter who can help us with that?"

"Consider it done."

With that get-together complete, we each embarked on completing our respective tasks.

*

In Bangor, we have a beautiful waterfront park located along a mile-long stretch of the Penobscot River. It has a highly unoriginal name; it is known simply as *Bangor Waterfront Park*. But I prefer that name to a park named after some jackass politician...

Our waterfront park offers scenic public spaces, walking paths and green spaces along the river. During the summer, there are flotillas of sailboats cruising the river; people picnicking; bikers and joggers – all enjoying this sometimes serene, sometimes packed park.

The park has an amphitheater: the *Maine Savings Amphitheater*. It accommodates up to 16,500 people – but realistically, if we throw our concert, we are expecting about 2,000 to 3,000 people. So, we won't even reach a quarter of its capacity.

*

Tito has come to the realization that his father, Manuel, is irretrievable. The immigrant prison system makes no provision for the release of its prisoners. *My Father is in essence dead*, Tito has concluded. No way to contact him, no way to free him, no expectation that he'll be freed. Manny is serving a life sentence for simply crossing a border and establishing a successful business.

Still, Tito hopes that our protests will accelerate public condemnation of our immigrant policy and force the government to take corrective action.

So, Tito is now more determined than ever to make our protests heard beyond social media. He wants to take revenge for the kidnapping of his father. It's his reason for living; his raison d'être.

*

"I have been unable to book any of the big names I mentioned last week when I proposed this concert," Tito confessed after several days of trying to schedule some of the big influencers in Latino music. "But I have located other Latino bands in Texas, California, and New York who are willing to sign up, play, and promote our immigrant humanitarian message. The cost for these bands will be minimal – they are willing to do this gig for free if we pay for their transportation and hotel rooms. Our total cost for this will be approximately $21,000."

To Mary, I asked, "And what will police protection and security cost?"

"Fifty officers for the whole day at $75 per hour is: 50 X 8 hours X $75 per hour. That works out to $30,000."

"Ouch," I said. "Why fifty? Why not 25? That would cut our cost to half that amount, so $15,000."

"50 is the number the department recommends.

"I'll need you to check with the department to see if we can get by with 25 officers. Remember, we're only talking about a small audience of 2,000 to 3,000."

"I'll run it by them," Mary committed.

"Okay then. I've reached out to the Mayor's office with our proposed concert. He's all for it. He will be speaking with

Waterfront Concerts, the group that manages the amphitheater. The City of Bangor owns the amphitheater, and the Mayor is going to push *Waterfront Concerts* to allow us to use the park for free. I'll know more about that this afternoon."

Mary thought about the situation. "If we get it for free, how are we going to come up with the seed money to pay the band's expenses and security detail?"

I anticipated that question and had carefully considered my answer. "I have a fair amount of money in my retirement savings. I can cover the $36,000, and we can reimburse my account with revenue from the ticket sales."

"No, Olivia, we can't let you do that!" Mary replied adamantly. "No, Professor, that's a huge risk. My father would not like it for you to take such a risk."

I looked at both of them. "Hey, let's do the math. If we charge $15 per ticket and get 2,500 attendees, the total revenue is $15 x 2,500. And that equals $37,500. That's more than needed to reimburse me."

"Plus, I'm old, I have no children to leave my savings to, I own my own home with no mortgage, so I could always borrow against my house if this does not work out. But if it does, and we get 3,000 or 4,000 attendees, we'll have a ton of working capital to promote our cause. Mary, if you get the security cost down, and the Mayor gets us the venue, I'm doing this."

I think Mary was very proud of me at that moment. I had just demonstrated the strength of my commitment.

*

Mary got the security cost within reason. The Mayor managed to reduce the amphitheater cost to zero, and *Waterfront Concerts* assisted us in securing food trucks and other vendors for our event. Tito got the bands. Alex secured the media coverage we needed to promote our event.

Chapter 35 – Success

On June 14, 2025, "*No Kings*" demonstrator protests took place nationwide and were hugely successful. Mary and I went down to Portland, Maine, to speak and get our voices heard. On the following day, Sunday, June 15th, our concert in Bangor would take place. It was perfect timing. We had a large contingency of protesters in Maine, and we were the follow-on draw to *No Kings Day*.

*

6,231. Six thousand, two hundred and thirty-one. That was the number of tickets sold to our event. It was wildly successful — beyond our wildest expectations. The Mayor of Bangor joined in and expressed his displeasure with the kidnapping of Manny Candelaria and others. The Latino music was out of this world, rivaling any other of the professional concerts scheduled that summer. Individuals of all ages attended the event. Families came. The crowd was stoked by the musicians who constantly echoed "*Save Manny, save Manny, save Manny*."

*

The proceeds from the event exceeded $50,000 after my investment had been paid back. So, now, the question was: "What to do with the $50,000?" We left that decision to Tito.

*

Tito distributed our profit to a number of immigrant advocacy groups. He contacted the *Detention Watch Network* – an organization leading their "*Communities Not Cages*" campaign. The *American Friends Service Committee* actually contacted Tito after seeing one of the videos he had done about Manny's plight. They cohost anti-ICE demonstrations, and Tito was asked to speak at one such event.

The Immigrant Justice Network now distributes our videos in national mobilization efforts against our country's immigrant deportation policy.

CHIRLA, the *Coalition for Human Immigrant Rights*, provides legal services to immigrants and monitors ICE raids. They constantly share their immigrant protection stories with us, which

we then discuss in our videos.

Finally, there is the *Unión Del Barrio*, a grassroots group that documents ICE activities. We got plenty of fuel from them about ICE civil rights violations.

Chapter 36 – Deep Throat

In the final week of June, Alex got a call from a whistleblower. The call was from Augusta, Maine's capitol, and Alex figured it was one of his many political contacts at the State House — so he picked it up.

"Mr. Monroe," it started, "I'm not going to share my name, and I'm using someone else's phone without his knowledge, so this cannot be traced to me – but I have some news for you. That man that you've been talking about in your videos, Manny Candelaria," the caller paused.

Alex's ears perked. "You have my full attention," Alex told Deep Throat.

"Well, one of our state senators, one of the MAGA crowd that is deeply supportive of POTUS and his anti-American programs, listened to some of your broadcasts, did some digging, and discovered the name of the student you were using to drive your social media protests. She found that he had a Spanish last name, but she also discovered that he was a legitimate American citizen. She had her people contact the *Bangor City Clerk's* office, and they found his birth certificate. She was confounded. As an American citizen, the student could not be arrested and deported."

At least not until POTUS drives his birthright citizenship agenda through the Supreme Court, Alex thought.

"But that didn't stop her. She had a detective from ICE look into that kid's parents. Mother is dead. Father is a businessman in Bangor."

Alex about wet his pants. This was hot news – superhot news.

"Please go on."

"Anyway, despite there being hundreds of Manuel Candelarias in the U.S., the ICE detective was able to show that this Manuel was

undocumented. It was one of our own state senators who got Manuel Candelaria deported. And she probably made some big points with the Federal administration for doing so."

"Can you tell me who this senator is?"

"Nope. You'll have to figure that one out for yourself. I'll give you a hint, though. Just look for the one with a big brown smear on her nose. She is a real brown-noser."

The informant paused, then said, "I've got to go. I've got to put this phone back on my donor's desk before he finds out. I wish you luck." Then click.

*

After the phone call, I considered his next step. Should he make Olivia and Mary aware of this? Should I tell Tito? Should he head down to Augusta and start snooping around, using some of his state senator and state legislator contacts to verify this story?

I chose to head directly for the Bangor PCPTV office. There, I would have another conversation with Warren Lebold. This was big news — politically sensitive news. And reporting it would definitely put our station in the federal government crosshairs. Would the station back me on creating an exposé on a Maine state politician?

Chapter 37 – CECOT Prison

In Bangor, they did a cursory search and verified that no documentation bearing the name "*Manuel Candelaria*" could be found in any immigration records at City Hall. No birth certificate, no green card, no nothing.

I was, therefore, held at ICE headquarters in Bangor, then sent to the *Cumberland County Jail* in Portland. I was given no access to an attorney — I was simply a prisoner — with no rights.

At *Portland International Jetport* I was put on a plane to some destination in the South. The license plates read "Louisiana," so I assume that I was imprisoned for a short while somewhere within that state.

From that prison, I was shunted onto another plane, *GlobalX Airlines*, and taken to a foreign prison. That flight was filled to capacity — two hundred handcuffed prisoners and ten guards. Our heads had all been shaven; we were all dressed in orange prison garb. Everyone was strangely quiet. We all suspected that we knew what was ahead — incarceration in a prison run by a foreign government that didn't give a rat's ass about us.

We landed in El Salvadore, ironically translated as "*the Savior*." The country's name refers specifically to Jesus Christ as the Savior, which is why the country's full colonial name was *Provincia De Nuestro Señor Jesucristo, El Salvador Del Mundo* ("*Province of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Savior of the World*"). We all knew no salvation awaited us.

From the airport in San Salvador, the country's capitol, we were all whisked off the plane, shackled inside prison buses, and taken to CECOT prison. That was the last time I saw the great outdoors.

Airplane food... A turkey sandwich with melted cheese in a roll was the last decent meal I had before arriving at CECOT prison.

*

As a guest of ICE in an El Salvadorian prison, I had expected to be shoved in a cell with another inmate, and that would be just

like in the movies. I would introduce myself, Manny Candelaria, and my cellmate would introduce himself, and we would both learn the system inside this high-security prison. At least that's the way prison meet-ups work in the movies. That was not to be.

At gunpoint, all two hundred of us were escorted to two large prison cells, each capable of holding 100 prisoners. There were toilet facilities on the far wall, basically a wall with a gutter that allowed urine to flow out of the cell into some sewage system somewhere. Toilets to handle other excrement were also located along that wall. No stalls, no privacy. If you had to go, you did so in front of 100 prisoners. Because there were only three toilets to service one hundred of us, you had to wait in line to use these out-in-the-open toilets. And, if someone clogged one of the toilets, that waiting line became longer. And if two toilets became clogged, long lines of men "holding it" ensued, with wait times of up to an hour to use the facilities. And sometimes, or I should say, usually, there was no toilet paper.

The beds were suspended metal frames: no mattresses, no sheets, no pillows. And, there were only seventy-five beds in that cell, and a hundred prisoners. So, twenty-five of us had to sleep on the floor. Fights broke out almost immediately as prisoners claimed their turf.

It was not long before the turf wars erupted. Most of us were peaceable men imprisoned for violating a border. But, mixed in with us were a few "tough guys," real criminals who had been accused of murder, rape, battery, other violent crimes, and drug dealing. These guys took over the cell, throwing the smaller, less violent men out of their beds and taking on some of the larger prisoners who resisted.

To ensure survival, you had to pick a side. Did you want to align with bad guys — or less bad guys? There was no room for honest, non-violent, God-fearing Catholic men to maneuver. You couldn't just say, "Heh, I'm non-violent," and expect the gangs to leave you alone. You had to pick a side. You had to pick a protector.

There were costs for that protection. The only form of "currency" available to all of us was food. If you wanted to survive, you had to give up some or all of your food rations to your protectors. They ate well; we starved.

There was another form of currency that some men used — their bodies. Out in the open, these prisoners would perform oral sex on their "leaders" in order to forestall beatings. Others would take it up the rear. These guys would submit to anything as a matter of self-preservation.

*

Then came the guards. Their job was to intimidate us. They wanted us to be silent, to be placid, to sit there day after day after day saying nothing and doing nothing. Any form of resistance would result in being removed from the cell, taken to a torture chamber, where a gang of guards would beat a prisoner with rubber hoses, prod them with electrical cattle prods, or stun them with stun sticks.

Sometimes, for prisoners they despised for no apparent reason except perhaps they didn't like a furtive glance from that prisoner, or they didn't like the way that prisoner looked, they would come up with new forms of torture involving construction tools.

One day, one of our gang, "*Los Indocumentados*," translated as "*The Undocumented*," was taken to the chamber, stripped, prodded — and then one of the guards, a sadistic bastard, tied his hands to a table and broke out a drill — proceeding to drill holes into the prisoner's hands. He had so much fun doing that, he upped his game with the next prisoner, beating one of his hands into a bloody pulp using a hammer.

All for crossing a border...

*

A young man, by the name of José Mateo, secured a bed near mine. We got to talking — or I should say, whispering.

"How'd they get you?" he asked.

"I was at my produce market; they came and took me."

"You were a businessman?"

"I was. I sold discount produce to various restaurants and individual customers. My business was quite successful."
I asked, "And you?"

"They found my family hiding out in a basement during an ICE raid. My father and I blocked the agents as they attempted to capture my mother and sister. But they escaped through the basement bulkhead. And my father had taught them how to use a pipe to prevent the doors from opening from the inside, so the agents were unable to pursue them. They had us, however."
"You look kinda young to me," I said. "How old are you?"

"I'm sixteen, but I look older, so they took me, claimed I was eighteen, and arrested me. They separated me from my father – I've not seen him since. And I'm not likely to see my mother and sister ever again." José's voice was one of despair.

I wasn't shocked that they put a child in with us older men. With ICE, it's all about numbers. It's not about following the laws of the USA regarding individual civil rights.

José and I continued to talk about our families, about the gangs, and about the guards. We were in constant fear, so our voices never rose above a whisper. But we took comfort in each other's company. While with José, I constantly thought about my son Tito...

*

It happened in the middle of the night about a month after we had been imprisoned. The guards came into our cell and seized José. They escorted him out and brought him to the torture chamber. Only, they left the door partially open. We could all hear José's screams as they beat and tortured him.

And then we all heard one of the guards say, "Agáchate y chilla

como un cerdo." Translated, it means "bend over and squeal like a pig." The other guards laughed heartily. We could hear the table in the chamber being dragged across the room. We listened to the scuffle as José was presumably tied to the table. And then we heard him squealing like a pig. I recognized the line. It was from a movie called "*Deliverance*" where a male camper is attacked by a group of hillbillies and forced to submit to anal sex. These strangers raped him.

It sounded like more than one guard was involved in that attack.

"*Lo están violando! Lo están violando!*" I yelled at the top of my lungs — waking up any prisoners who had managed to sleep through tonight's beating.

That riled my fellow prisoners, and all sorts of obscenities were hurled at the guards. But we were all behind bars; there was nothing we could do. The guards finally closed the torture room door. The room was soundproof. We could hear them no more. Our protests and insults continued for about half an hour, then my fellow inmates gave up and fell asleep. I did not sleep.

Later, I saw the door to the torture chamber open, and I saw José being carried out of the room.

*

Usually, after a beating and/or torture, a prisoner is dragged back into his bunk and left there in pain or comatose. But in José's case, he was carried out of the chamber by his hands and feet, his head drooping backward and swaying as the guards took him out of the building entrance. We never saw José again. They disappeared him. Over the next few months, other prisoners were "disappeared."

Chapter 38 – Prisons as Profit Centers

Mary was still searching for her next teaching gig when she was contacted by one of our immigrant advocacy groups and asked to review a report they had written on how immigrant prisons operate. She assented.

"Olivia, you need to read this," she implored after completing her review. She was deeply disturbed by what they had written. "Sure, what is it?" I answered.

"It's a report entitled '*Immigrant Prisons: Inhumanity, Oversight and Profit*.' It explains the hell that Manny must be going through.

"What's it about?" I asked.

"Well, first, it calls for greater scrutiny of immigrant prisons for their inhumane conditions, lack of oversight, and profit-driven expansion. Then it provides snapshots of what life must be like in those prisons. It is awful, worse than I ever expected, and heartbreaking."

"What does it say about the conditions?" I asked. "And from where are they getting their background data?"

"It's unclear to me exactly where all of these insights are coming from, but they sound credible. One of the criticisms that I will relay to the authors is that they have to provide background on their information sources." Mary paused.

"So, here are the key points they raise about prison conditions. The authors claim:"

- *Overcrowding*: Facilities often operate well beyond capacity, with detainees sleeping on cold concrete floors under constant fluorescent lighting.
- *Medical Neglect*: Many are denied critical medications or treatment—even after surgery or during emergencies.
- *Solitary Confinement*: Used punitively, especially for

vulnerable populations like LGBTQ+ individuals or those seeking mental health care. And,

- *Abuse & Dehumanization*: Reports include detainees being shackled during meals, forced to eat off chairs "like dogs," and punished for crying or asking for help.

"Poor Manny," I empathized. "He must be going through hell down there. Does it say anything about beatings, torture, and rapes?"

"It doesn't focus on those subjects. But you and I both know that that kind of stuff is going on. It happens in our own prisons; it must be happening there, too. I'll search for information on those subjects and include it in my feedback report."

"After it describes the inhumane living conditions in immigrant prisons, the report veers into how these prisons are operated. It claims that the focus of these prisons is profit over people."

"Interesting. So, they're operating those prisons like a business, searching for ways to turn a profit. That would imply that the more prisoners they can jam into their cells, the more profit they make. So, our plan to provide them with an endless supply of immigrant prisoners will enable those foreign governments that are accepting our prisoners to make money. It's a new revenue stream for those governments — a stream coming at the expense of human beings."

Mary turned her attention to the "*Profits Over People*" section.

"They say that these detention centers are largely privatized. They claim that about 90% of detainees are held in facilities run by private companies, companies that are incentivized to cut costs while constantly expanding their facilities. More expansion means more capacity, and more capacity means they can hold more prisoners, which means greater profitability."

"Then they provide examples of these prisons and how they operate. It says here," Mary read, 'That a prison in Florida known

as *Krome North* is known for overcrowding and abusive treatment, including lack of hygiene and denial of medical care."

"That makes sense," I said. "Jam as many people as you can into your cells, feed them as little as possible, just enough to sustain them, and screw medical care, that's an expense."

"Yeah," Mary agreed. "These are being run just like the Nazi Concentration Camps of World War II. Only there is an incentive to keep prisoners alive. Each one is a source of profit."

"Here are some more examples," Mary continued. "At the *Broward Transitional Center* in Florida, detainees are punished for seeking mental health support, and solitary confinement is used as retaliation. And at the *Federal Detention Center*, there are unsafe conditions and a lack of legal access for immigrants."

Mary considered what she had just read. "Lack of access to mental health support. Imagine the psychological toll of being shoved into crowded cells where you're in constant danger of attack. The stress..."

"I'd also worry about what happens if any of those people are eventually released," I added. "They all will have a grudge against the United States, that's for sure. I wonder how many terrorists we're breeding."

"Notice that these facilities are in the U.S.," Mary observed. "So that explains where some of the report data is coming from. We have some insight into our own prison systems. But what about the prison systems in foreign countries? What data are we getting about conditions there?"

"Those centers are often located in remote areas, making family visits and legal representation difficult. The psychological toll — especially on children and vulnerable adults — is probably profound," Mary speculated. "Still, I don't see anything about conditions in foreign countries in this report. We know they are keeping immigrants on the island of Eswatini near South Africa, and we know about El Salvador."

"And we have shaky agreements with South Sudan and Uzbekistan," I added. "But we have no insight into prisoner treatment in any of those counties. It must be horrible."

"Sickening," Mary confirmed.

"I agree. People confined in harsh conditions are being psychologically tortured and probably beaten and raped. All at the behest of the current administration. Truly sickening..."

Chapter 39 – The Sacrilege on Our Country's Birthday

"It's about to happen," I told Mary back on May 20th.

"What's that?" she asked.

"The end of democracy."

"Huh? What do you mean? What prompted this declaration?" Mary asked, curious as to the source of my out-of-the-blue comment.

"The President's '*Big Beautiful Bill*' has just been placed before Congress. If this passes, America is lost. We will have funded a dictator who will use the windfall of borrowed money that the bill provides to effect sweeping changes to our existing constitutional government. He will send control of education back to the states, allowing states like Florida to continue banning books, limit discussions of LGBTQ+ identities in early grades, and restrict how race and racism can be taught. They're creating an environment where teachers self-censor to avoid penalties. They've created a climate of fear, compliance, and surveillance. And now, POTUS will finally have the funds, a heavy amount of funding, to heavily fund the mass deportation of immigrants. In short, America as we know it, will be sunk."

"Oh my God!" she responded as she considered what I had just pointed out. "They're planning to destroy our country — right before our very eyes." She now understood why POTUS's "*Big Beautiful Bill*" would fundamentally change America for the worse.

I talked Mary through some of the provisions of the Bill, and its implications.

Mary, too, became uneasy. "Add those concerns," Mary observed, "To his anti-DEI stance, his promotion of fossil fuels, which will help ruin our climate, his planned attack on voting rights, and his plan to control information by banning federal

agencies from establishing social media relationships — and we're totally screwed."

"So, if this bill passes Congress, it will still have to get through the Senate. What are the chances it fails there?" Mary asked.

"Well, the MAGA-oriented House of Representatives will definitely pass this bill — they pass everything POTUS wants. Then the Senate will consider it and make modifications. There will be some backroom dealings to satisfy various senators — but with the House and Senate controlled by Republicans, this will highly likely pass. Then the President will sign it, and he will have all the funds he needs to execute his extreme right agenda."

Mary had reached the same conclusion. "And then he'll use his Supreme Court, which is stacked with conservative right-wing justices, to undermine our constitution."

I agreed. "We're totally screwed. With the passage of this bill, Democracy will end."

*

On May 20th, POTUS's spending bill, POTUS's "*Big Beautiful Bill*," was introduced in the House of Representatives by Representative Jodey Arrington, a Republican from Texas.

On May 22, 2025, that bill passed the House BY A SINGLE VOTE, 215–214.

On July 1, 2025, the bill passed the Senate, AGAIN, BY ONE VOTE.

On July 3rd, the House agreed to the Senate's amendments. And right on schedule, as POTUS demanded of his loyal army of supporters, the Big Beautiful Bill was signed into law by POTUS on July 4th."

The sacrilege on our country's birthday.

Chapter 40 – The Big UGLY Bill

On July 5th, 2025, I produced the following video with Alex's behind-the-scenes videographer assistance. As I said earlier, I'm a Fiscal Republican. I believe that the government should make an effort to balance the books every year. Some borrowing is okay with me, but with the passage of the Republican-led *Big Beautiful Bill,* I witnessed the most enormous political disservice to the American people I have ever seen. The Republican Party not only failed to be fiscally responsible, but they mortgaged the future of our children for generations to come. We are so screwed.

A slim majority of voters in the United States — by a 1.5 percent margin — gave the Republicans the Presidency. They also gave control of the House and the Senate to the Republican Party. And the Supreme Court has a 6-3 conservative majority. *The Republican Party now OWNS America.*

*

I chose not to cry over spilt milk in my next video. Instead, I wanted to put what the "Big Beautiful Bill" had done to our financial future into perspective.

So, on July 5th I produced the following video.

"Our current national debt of $36.6 trillion is far too much for our country to carry. But, with the *Big Beautiful Bill*, our debt will rise to almost $60 trillion by 2035.

[I show a chart that shows our debt DOUBLING in ten years].

"This is obscene. It will lead to increased interest rates, the housing sector will experience a considerable slowdown, millions of jobs will be lost, wages will decline, and the Social Security system will not be rescued. This bill mortgages the future of our children. This bill is an abomination."

[The video shows a picture of impoverished American children.]

"On May 20th, POTUS's spending bill, POTUS's 'Big Beautiful Bill' was introduced in the House of Representatives by Jodey

Arrington, a Republican from Texas. On May 22, 2025, that bill passed the House by a single vote, 215–214. On July 1, 2025, that bill passed the Senate, again by one vote. On July 3rd, the House agreed to the Senate amendments. And right on schedule, as POTUS demanded of his loyal army of supporters, the *Big Beautiful Bill* was signed into law by POTUS on July 4th."

[Picture of POTUS smiling, gloating.]

"So let's understand how a big portion of this big bill is being spent. Let's look at I from an "immigrant removal perspective." It has been estimated that the immigrant detention costs per day range from $150 to $225 per day, depending on region, facility, and services."

[Flash the math on the screen.]

"Currently, the number of immigrants in prison is estimated at around sixty thousand so far this year. 60,000 prisoners X @$200 per day equals $12,000,000 per day. Times 365 days in a year, that's $12,000,000 time 365 equals $4,380,000,000 per year. Four and a third TRILLION dollars!"

[Show the U.S. total Gross Domestic Product output of all of our goods and services – around 30 TRILLION dollars. Then add in the current cost of the immigrant detention system – four and a third trillion dollars. The graphic needs to show that the immigration system is burning about thirteen percent of our total GDP.]

"Keep doing the math. Let's say we end 2025 with 100,000 immigrants in prisons around the US, and around the world in places like El Salvador and South Sudan. That's 100,000 immigrants times $200 per day times 365 days a year. That's a total of $7,300,000,000. Seven and a third trillion dollars per year. That's TRILLION dollars."

[Show that our current run rate will take the immigrant detention system up to 26% of our total GDP. And point out that under the

current tariff system, our GDP could go down, increasing the percentage of total GDP being burned by immigrant detention.]

"Now, double that burden on prison systems to 200,000 immigrants. Then we'll be spending almost fifteen trillion dollars a year by the end of 2026. FIFTEEN TRILLION DOLLARS to support an inhumane system, with ninety percent of the immigrants captured not guilty of any serious crime. FIFTEEN TRILLION DOLLARS."

[Graphic shows that one out of every two dollars that our economy produces will be going to immigrant detention.]

"Our *Gross Domestic Product*, the economy of the United States, the amount of goods and services we produce and deliver, is approximately THIRTY TRILLION DOLLARS per year. At the current run rate, POTUS's immigration detention program will cost half the value of our entire GDP. No wonder valuable, necessary programs like Medicaid are being cut. We're using that money to incarcerate innocent people."

[Show a graphic that reflects how the American public values immigrants, and believes that the POTUS immigration detention system is not the right approach.]

"Why are we doing this to ourselves?"

[Show a graphic of impoverished Americans.]

"Advice. Start attending protest rallies. Write to your Senators. Write to your Congressmen. Make it clear that they will lose your vote in the upcoming elections if they don't stop this wasteful program. Do something. Do it now, before we waste TRILLIONS more dollars on a program that only immigrant haters want."

[Show a picture of Klansmen, of Nazis, and other hate groups.]

*

This was to be my last video on Immigration. Mary and Alex would have to take the torch from now on. I needed to focus on something else...

Chapter 41 – Free Manny!

Our Bangor fund-raiser concert had been a triumph — packed stadium, loud applause, and enough donations to keep several immigrant-rights groups afloat for months. But even as we celebrated, one question hung over us like a storm cloud: *How in God's name were we going to free Manny*?

No one said it aloud, but we all felt it. The problem was too big, too distant, too locked behind concrete walls in El Salvador. Then something strange happened.

Because we'd donated our concert profits to advocacy groups across the country, our phones started lighting up with calls from people who track ICE movements and federal negotiations. One call in particular changed everything.

"Did you know the Venezuelan government is in the middle of a prisoner swap with CECOT prison?" an advocate told Mary. Mary nearly dropped her pen.

"Olivia, did you hear that? Venezuela is negotiating a prisoner exchange with the Salvadorans."

"I was not aware of that. Explain."

Mary listened, scribbled notes, thanked the caller, then turned to me with a look that was equal parts disbelief and possibility. "This Friday — the 18th — and Venezuela is planning to trade a group of their prisoners for Venezuelan nationals being held in CECOT. Rumor is that over two hundred Venezuelan men swept up by the administration in March will be sent back to Venezuela. In return, Venezuela will release ten American nationals and a number of political prisoners held by Maduro's regime."

I leaned back, trying to map the implications. "So, Venezuela gets hundreds of their people back — immigrants our administration has painted as criminals — in exchange for ten Americans and

some political dissidents that we want freed?"
Mary nodded. "Which means someone in the State Department has decided that CECOT prisoners can be swapped. They're going to spin this as a diplomatic victory. They've leveraged immigration kidnapping into a 'free Americans' action."

"It's absurd," I said, paused, and thought for a moment. "But it cracks open a door. If Venezuela can negotiate a release, maybe Mexico could too. Maybe Manny isn't as trapped as we thought."

"It's a long shot," Mary said, "but it's the first sign that anyone has ever walked out of CECOT alive."

We agreed to wait for the final details.

When they arrived, the term "whacky" for the government's deal didn't begin to cover it.

July 18, 2025
An international prisoner swap unfolded between Venezuela and El Salvador. Two hundred fifty-two Venezuelan immigrants held inside CECOT were exchanged for ten Americans and an undisclosed number of Venezuelan political prisoners.

"It's online," Mary told me. "The exchange is happening. And the U.S. is calling it a humanitarian win — claiming we rescued Americans who were being beaten and tortured abroad."

"Who are these Americans?" I asked.

Mary read from the report. "Lucas Hunter — arrested while kite-surfing too close to the Venezuelan border. Wilbert Castaneda — detained in a Caracas hotel, accused of CIA ties. Jonathan Pagan González and Fabian Buglione Reyes — arrested during travel."

She paused and did a double-take. "And here's the wild one: Dahud Hanid Ortiz. A U.S. Army veteran convicted of a triple homicide. Venezuela doesn't extradite people, so they jailed him

there."
I blinked. "We just negotiated the release of a convicted murderer — and we're calling that a humanitarian victory?"

"Apparently that's how the administration is framing it," Mary said.

"Incredible," I muttered. "Do they really think the public will swallow that?"

Mary shook her head. "If anything, Venezuela looks like the hero here. They freed over two hundred of their own people — immigrants imprisoned by the U.S. — while we're celebrating the return of a murderer!"

*

In the days that followed, the freed Venezuelans spoke to reporters and human-rights groups. Their stories were harrowing: routine beatings, forced kneeling for hours, filthy conditions, and medical neglect so severe that antibiotics, insulin, cancer drugs, and even basic painkillers were out of reach for most immigrant detainees.

And as we listened to their testimonies, one thought kept circling back, impossible to ignore: *If two hundred fifty-two Venezuelans could walk out of CECOT... maybe Manny could too.*

Chapter 42 – The Right-Wing Borg Discussion

"This is unbelievable," Mary said to me just after sending me a link to an interview with twenty self-described far-right voters. "These people are nuts!"

I was at my computer, so I clicked on the URL that she provided me, and she sat down next to me to rewatch the program she had just viewed.

I clicked on the URL that Mary had given me:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2S-WJN3L5eo

We watched the whole thing, as right-wing Republicans attempted to defend and justify the actions of POTUS and his party. (Note: if you're pressed for time, start at the 22:08 mark to find the furthest-right interview I have ever seen. It is truly reprehensible).

*

I started YouTube. The program that Mary wanted me to watch was a debate between a progressive journalist and twenty far-right conservatives, entitled, strangely enough, "*1 Progressive vs 20 Far-Right Conservatives.*"

The format was a reporter asking conservatives their opinions on a series of hot issues with the current Republican administration, including whether POTUS was defying the Constitution, are immigrants good for America, is POTUS pro-criminal, should birthright citizenship be abolished, and is the administration's support for the Israeli Gaza offensive justified. Loaded questions included: "*Do you believe in Democracy*?" and "*Should free speech protect hate speech*?"

On the first question, whether POTUS is defying the Constitution, one participant argued that the Constitution was good, but advocated for autocracy over democracy. I know Constitutional law – it is wholly incompatible with autocracy. It would be like having constitutional rights dictated by a king... The immigration question, the one Mary and I were most

interested in, was asked of several right-wing participants. "Immigrants are destroying America" was the conservative position, with several participants claiming that immigrants erode American culture and values.

Another participant argued: "They have nothing in common with us."

Another conservative argued that "modern immigrants don't assimilate and are fundamentally incompatible with American society."

The show moved into a discussion about white supremacy. One participant claimed: "White people are the real Native Americans." I saw that response as an attempt to rewrite history to justify exclusionary policies. I actually know Indigenous history. Other peoples in America were here twenty thousand years before the Europeans arrived...

Another claim was "Anchor babies are a threat." This was in reference to children born in the U.S. who somehow threaten our country. It's part of the birthright citizenship debate. The contention was that immigrants exploit the 14th Amendment to gain legal status for their children.

And on it went...

*

This whole show was a real eye-opener. I gained valuable insights into the far-right. I learned a bit about how their minds work – how they're willing to ignore sixty years of civil rights advances to promote their white supremacy views. How they're eager to scapegoat immigrants because "immigrants don't assimilate well." How they were fully willing to identify themselves as Nazis and Fascists.

I concluded that the moniker "*Make America Great Again*" really means "*Make America White and Christian Again*."

*

When the show ended, Mary and I discussed it. We were both appalled, but we tried to weigh the pros and cons of what had been said.

"I think it was valuable from a free speech perspective," Mary stated. "If you shut down that show on 'hate speech' allegations, we'd have no insight into far-right minds."

"I agree completely with Freedom of Speech. What was disturbing, however, was that the participant agreed with free speech only when it echoed his own beliefs. Other thoughts and speech should be verboten..."

We discussed other key interviews in the show, and then we digressed.

*

It was I who turned the conversation into a discussion of the *Star Trek* movie, *First Contact*, when Captain Jean-Luc Picard was assimilated into an alien collective known as "*The Borg*." Mary and I are both "Trekkie wannabees," so she instantly identified with my analogy.

"I found some interesting parallels between what these right-wingers were saying and how the Borg behaves," I observed. "The Borg" are fictional characters from various places who are linked through a collective consciousness called "*The Collective*." *Individuality is erased from this consciousness; the Borg all act as one.*

"I felt the same way," Mary added, and continued, "I kept asking myself, 'Is this what this administration is trying to do? Do we all need to profess to Christianity and act as Christians?'"

I added, "Do we all need to support an autocracy by becoming the Borg? Should we all hate the same people — especially immigrants and the LGBTQ+ community? Should we all read the same 'approved' literature?"

"I think that under this administration, we must buy into their worldview — we must be," Mary paused, "*assimilated.*"

I quipped, "The most powerful line in this Star Trek movie is: '*We are the Borg. You will be assimilated. Resistance is futile.*"

Is this the world these right-wingers and the new administration are really trying to build?

Chapter 43 – Tribalism

When we started protesting the federal government's anti-DEI position — its anti-Diversity, Equity and Inclusion policy, I had told Mary that I believed fundamentalist churches were primarily responsible for the homophobic, queerphobic, transphobic, biphobic, acephobic and interphobic behaviors of their congregations.

I expressed this same opinion to a psychiatrist at one of the conferences that I attended. She quickly corrected me. She said, "LGBTQ+ phobias are not clinical phobias in the classic sense. They result from social prejudices and irrational fears that manifest as discrimination, stigma, and hostility."

She paused, then added, "These phobias are usually rooted in cultural and religious beliefs, lack of education about LGBTQ+ problems and their gender identities, lack of exposure to LGBTQ+ people, and sometimes the fear of difference and perceived threats to social norms."

Her answer was a correction for me — I had to take a broader view of the source of anti-LGBTQ+ hatred. I had to consider the other factors she had mentioned.

So, the next natural question, given that Mary and I were now focused on the immigration problem, was: "*What about xenophobia*?" Xenophobia is a fear or dislike of people from other countries or cultures.

The psychiatrist had a fascinating answer. "If I were a sociologist, I'd talk about '*tribalism*.' As part of our evolution, we experienced the need to stick together in small groups to protect each other. We practiced 'in-group favoritism,' we had language, religion, and internal group dynamics in common."

I knew a little about tribalism, but she continued her explanation, and I started to see the parallels between tribalism and immigration.

"As part of tribalism, we instinctively favor those who share our identity markers. If they look like us, they can be included. If not, they are to be shunted away."

This was starting to make a lot of sense as to why white supremacist America is having so much trouble with immigrants in our midst.

She continued. "Outsiders are viewed with suspicion, fear, and often hostility. Even if no threats exist."

Again, another important insight. We fear immigrants; they are a threat to our security, so we preempt them.

This psychiatrist put the reason we hate immigrants into a narrower perspective. "They're not part of our tribe; they are perceived as a threat, so they must go."

These are very much the same reasons why the LGBTQ community experiences so much hatred. I would have to share the psychiatrist's insight with Mary.

Chapter 44 – We Shall Overcome

When I got back to Bangor, I decided to do a little digging to see what some church positions are on Immigration deportation. I found what I expected: there are still some fundamentalist churches calling for immigrants to be deported. But, on the other hand, some big churches preach tolerance and love toward immigrants.

I dug further.

*

The *Family Research Council* is a prominent conservative Christian advocacy group. This group influences the behavior of various member churches. Its president has praised the POTUS' efforts to "unshackle" churches politically, including support for stricter immigration enforcement.

The pastor of the *First Baptist Church of Dallas* is a vocal POTUS supporter. His church has defended the administration's immigration policies. With its anti-immigration stance, I'd love to see this pastor, in his pulpit, rail against immigrants and then end his sermon with a good old "Love thy neighbor." Hypocrisy at its finest...

Some Evangelical congregations have also backed the POTUS' emphasis on law and order and border control.

Strangely, a group called the *National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference* (NHCLC) has consistently supported Trump's focus on deporting undocumented individuals — but only in the case that those deportees had criminal records. This group also supports strengthening border security.

The *Faith and Freedom Coalition*, based in Georgia, is a conservative Christian political advocacy group. It supports the POTUS agenda and has backed his immigration stance as part of a broader law-and-order agenda.

The *Assemblies of God* leadership offers a "tweener" position. Some of their leaders have voiced support for immigration

policies that uphold the law but insist that immigration deportation protects human dignity. How could that possibly be. Immigration imprisonment violates human rights and dignity...

*

As a former Catholic, I was interested in the church's official position on immigrant deportation. It was time to update my understanding of the Catholic Church opinion on immigration enforcement in the United States. I was pleasantly surprised.

I thought it would be helpful to take a look at the Catholic position from two perspectives, that of *Pope Francis*, recently departed, and that of the new pope, *Pope Benedict XVI*. Both Popes focused on emphasizing "*human dignity*." Pope Francis emphasized the "*infinite and transcendent dignity of every migrant*;" Pope Benedict stresses that "*every migrant is a human person with inalienable rights*." So, with respect to migrants, the Church is stressing their dignity.

Pope Benedict emphasizes "*inalienable rights*." He's the first American Pope, and so I found it interesting that his "inalienable" phrase, ironically, comes from the *U.S. Declaration of Independence*.

Across two papacies, a consistent moral thread emerges: human dignity must not be sacrificed to the machinery of deportation. Pope Francis has been especially blunt about the human cost of mass removals, warning that policies built solely on legal status tear families apart and erode the moral fabric of a society. Pope Benedict, while more focused on the structural causes of migration, emphasized the Church's obligation to respond with compassion and to insist that border enforcement never eclipse justice.

Both leaders have challenged governments to evaluate immigration laws through the lens of the person, not the other way around. Francis urged Catholics to resist the temptation to let "*inhumane laws override human dignity*," while Benedict acknowledged the legitimacy of border regulation but insisted that migrants must be treated justly and while also considering the

forces that drove them from home. This position, I concluded, is meant to benefit asylum pleaders.

*

During the course of my research, I came across one story stood out as a rare moment when Catholic Church teachings leapt off the page and into the street. In San Diego, Bishop Michael Pham — himself once a refugee from Vietnam — received his appointment to bishop in May 2025. Barely a month later, he was standing outside the *Edward J. Schwartz Federal Building*, not as a distant observer but as a shield.

Pham and a delegation of clergy attended immigration hearings with a simple mission: accompany migrants in and out of court, bear public witness to their dignity, and refuse to let them walk alone into the shadow of detention. ICE agents, who had previously made arrests at that courthouse, reportedly "scattered" when the clergy arrived. Apparently it would be bad publicity for ICE to start arresting clergy...

It was a striking image: cassocks and collars quietly disrupting the machinery of enforcement. I found myself thinking, *This is what moral courage looks like*. And then another thought followed: *Why isn't this happening everywhere? If the Church believes what it teaches about human dignity, then public, peaceful resistance — rooted in conscience — should not be the exception. It should be the norm*.

I kept digging, and found other faith voices in support of the dignity of the immigrant community.

- *The National Association of Evangelicals* supports border security but stresses the importance of family unity and the inherent dignity of immigrants.
- *The Catholic Diocese of Tennessee* has praised efforts to deport individuals who commit serious crimes but questioned the targeting of undocumented people with no criminal record.
- *The City Church in Nashville* has become a rare space where congregants with opposing views — some aligned

> with current immigration policies, others grounded in biblical hospitality — can speak openly without fracturing the community.

These examples show a spectrum of engagement, from cautious critique to active accompaniment.

*

Taken together, the Catholic Church and many progressive Christian communities have articulated a consistent concern: deportation policies that fracture families or disregard human dignity violate core moral principles. Some have begun to embody that conviction through public witness, as in San Diego. Others remain in the realm of statements and pastoral letters...

But history offers a reminder: movements grounded in conscience — as illustrated by Gandhi, or as took place in Selma, or countless lesser-known acts of civil courage — gain power only when people are willing to stand where their principles lead them. The San Diego clergy showed what that can look like. There is no reason it must remain an isolated moment.

*

As I completed my research I asked myself the following question: *What should be the role of Christian churches regarding immigration?* Christian priests, pastors, and congregations everywhere should be leading the charge against immigration. They should:

- Start singing "*We Shall Overcome*" in church.
- Rouse congregations into protest actions.
- Not let the massive plan to deport millions of immigrants take place without ensuring their human rights and human dignity are protected.
- *Not allow the degradation of human rights and human dignity to take place. They should emphasize that "Love thy neighbor" Christians who support today's immigration internment program are unadulterated "hypocrites!"*

The kind of placid, sit-back reaction that I'm seeing from even the progressive churches drives me nuts. For God's sake, practice what you preach...

Chapter 45 – Vote for Me and I'll Set You Free

In 1970, *The Temptations* sang a song called "Ball of Confusion *(That's What the World Is Today)*." It perfectly captured the American spirit as voters went to the polls on *Election Day*, Tuesday, November 5th, 2024. One of the verses in that song declares: "*Vote for me and I'll set you free...*"

In this past election, voting for conservative politicians who promised them world is precisely what the American people did. They voted for politicians who promised them a Christian, white supremacist agenda. Who promised them a stronger economy. Who would allegedly remove government waste, fraud, and abuse. Who would remove immigrants. Who would dismantle the strides made in civil rights for blacks and the LGBTQ+ community over the previous seventy years in order to "level the playing field" for white people. From now on, hiring would be based on "merit."

The American people were not to be set free; they were to be burdened with heavy debt, secret police, fewer jobs, massive layoffs, and the contempt of the world due to on-again-off-again TACO tariffs and illegal acts of war.

Mussolini, Franco, Hitler and Stalin would all be so proud of what America had just done to itself...

Chapter 46 – Ashes on the Ash Heap

The prison camp immediately began to hollow me out. The absence of sunlight, the stench, the constant threat of violence — each day stripped away another layer of the man I had been. My energy drained. My spirit dimmed. I moved like someone carrying invisible chains, reduced to surviving on scraps while surrounded by men who had long since surrendered to brutality. I was no longer living a life; I was enduring a sentence.

Then came the moment everything shifted.

During yet another eruption of chaos — shouts, fists, bodies crashing into metal — I suddenly sagged, as if the strength had been pulled out of me in a single breath. There had never been any hint of heart trouble. I had always been sturdy, tireless, the kind of man who could work from dawn to dusk without complaint. But now I folded to the ground, still, drained, and unable to rise.

When the fighting died down, two members my gang, *Los Indocumentados* lifted me and carried me back to the corner of our cell. I was conscious but barely. My limbs hung loose. My face had gone slack. A sharp, stabbing pain radiated through my back. I was unable to stand or even sit upright.

Members of my gang called to the guards, shouting through the bars for help. *"¡Necesita ayuda, necesita atención médica urgente!"* The plea echoed through the concrete, barred chamber.

The guards glanced over. I was still breathing. I wasn't dead. That was enough for them. With no doctor on staff and no intention of intervening, they simply turned away.

Only when the shouting escalated did a squad of guards arrive — not with medical supplies, but with weapons meant to restore order. The cell fell silent under their watch.

What I had suffered was a blockage of the artery that feeds the heart's main pumping chamber. Without treatment, the heart weakens quickly. As I lay on the metal bed, I felt pressure in my chest; I struggled for breath; I endured waves of pain that spread across my body. Hours later, I was covered in cold sweat. I needed urgent medical care — care that would never come...

*

Two days later, Manny's body finally gave out. He died without ever being examined, without a single attempt to save him. When the guards were notified, they summoned the sanitation crew. With no gurney available, the crew used a wheeled garbage bin to remove his body. The outer door opened, and Manny was taken toward the incinerator. Cremation.

By the end of the day, his ashes were discarded in a barren patch of land the guards mockingly called "*La montaña de basura*" — *the Mountain of Garbage.*

No notice was sent. No record was kept. Manny simply vanished.

*

The following morning, news broke in the United States about the treatment of immigrant detainees at a new facility in the Florida Everglades — nicknamed *Alligator Alcatraz* for its isolation amid swamps filled with alligators and venomous snakes. Built hastily with tents and trailers, the camp held thousands of detainees, many without charges or legal access.

A former guard described the conditions: tents sealed off from sunlight, no clocks, irregular showers, and bathrooms overwhelmed by overuse. Prisoners lived in a perpetual twilight, unable to tell day from night. The deprivation alone was enough to erode a person's sense of self.

International standards consider prolonged confinement without sunlight a form of torture. At Alligator Alcatraz, it was simply routine.

Chapter 47 – Another One of Me?

One of the things about being a transwoman is that it can be uncomfortable going to heterosexual bars unless escorted by a heterosexual man. That's why I enjoy going out to bars in the Bangor area with Alex. No one hassles me because I'm with a straight male.

But, every once in a while, you want to be surrounded by your own people, members of the LGBTQ+ community.
There are several "queer bars" in Maine, but my two favorites are in Southern Maine. I can always find people like me at *Maine Street* in Ogunquit and *Blackstones* in Portland.

Maine Street is known for its dance floors, drag shows, and theme nights such as *Saturday Night Fever* disco night, and *Dueling Drag Divas* featuring Emmy winner Chi Chi Rones and NYT-acclaimed Jo Anna. They battle it out with live vocals. As for other contestants, they MUST sing – no lip sync allowed.
Blackstones, in contrast, is a traditional pub environment. It's a great spot to meet like-minded people and strike up a conversation.

I prefer the subdued atmosphere of *Blackstones* to the showy atmosphere of *Maine Street*. I'm more of a talker than a dancer... Why go to either location? Because the people you encounter treat you as an equal. No confusion as to who you are. No awkward pick-up situations...

*

You can't tell by looking.

Guys in drag might not be transwomen; they may just be dressing up for show or to exaggerate feminine characters. Drag is something you do, not who you are.

Transwomen, on the other hand, are more gender focused. Our sex is different than the one we were born with. If we were so inclined, we could dress up and do drag. Sometimes, for humor's sake, we do that. But for us, transgender is who we are.

So, if you can't tell by looking, how do you identify other trans women?

I think I've developed "*transdar,*" a radar-like identification experience based upon my life experiences. It's a *gut feeling*, and I'm usually right.

*

My "transdar" enabled me to meet Stephanie. Stephanie is about 45 years old, maybe 50 – she won't tell me her exact age. She is French-Canadian; she comes from the Canadian Maritimes, the province of New Brunswick.

There I was in Brunswick, Maine, applying for a teaching job at the local college. And, as long as I was in Brunswick, which is about half an hour from Portland, I booked a hotel in Portland so that I could go out on the town — meaning so that I could go, unaccompanied, to Blackstone's, to be with "my people." And when I walked in, there was Stephanie sitting at the bar, alone. Ding, ding, ding. My transdar went off. I smiled at Stephanie, and she smiled back. I said, "Mind if I join you?" I know, how cliché...

"By all means." Stephanie's eyes suddenly lit up. She looked quizzical and then blurted out, "Oh, I think I know you!" she said excitedly, almost admiringly. "You're the lady professor who does all of those YouTubes on DEI!"

I laughed. Mary and I have become mini-celebrities. "Why, yes, I am. Do you like them?"

"Love 'em," came Stephanie's response. "I teach sociology at the *College of New Brunswick – St. John*. We're birds of a feather."

"I don't believe it — another college teacher! What are the chances?"

Stephanie said, "Statistically, pretty slim. Still, here we are."
I couldn't believe it. Two birds of a feather hanging out at an LGBTQ+ bar in Portland. Unexpected and uncanny.

*

I had yet to determine if Stephanie was a trans woman. She could just be a heterosexual woman in for a drink at Blackstone's, perhaps waiting for someone else.

So, we talked. Conversation is the key to figuring out the gender preference of the person you are talking to. I can, from experience, pick out trans women by their speech patterns, which are sometimes shaped by voice training; by their body language; by eye contact and facial cues; and/or by voice and expressions. Mostly, however, I can identify trans women through simple conversations. Clues ultimately emerge.

We started our conversation by discussing teaching. I asked about her specialties, she seemed to know mine already.

As we talked, the bartender came over, asking what I'd like to drink. I responded, "A light, dry chardonnay," and Stephanie added, "That's what I'm having. I recommend the *Bernier Chardonnay*."

I asked, "Are you going to have another?" and Stephanie replied, "At least one more."

I ordered a bottle; I was definitely having more than one glass of wine tonight. And I ordered some bar snacks.

Stephanie already knew that I had been fired from the *College of Maine* and asked how my job search was going. As we talked, all the while I was still trying to sort out if she was one of my people: trans. Her makeup, hair, and body style were all perfect. Her hands were small compared to mine, as were her feet. Is she a woman or a trans woman? Her body is perfect; she could have done a better job with her makeup — her crow's feet were showing; the way she talks is so feminine. I just plain couldn't tell.

Because she knew so much about me, I finally said, "You know that I was a trans woman professor at Maine, right?"

"Of course I knew that," Stephanie replied, "Just as I'm a transwoman assistant professor at the College of New Brunswick up in Canada. Along with teaching, we've got trans in common, too."

There it was, she's a trans woman! But there was still one more step. Trans women can prefer male partners, female partners, or both. I did not want Stephanie to think that I was a potential sexual partner, so I asked her preference.

"Males."

"Me too."

*

We had finished our bar snacks, yet we were both hungry, so we decided to have dinner together.

Blackstone is more of a bar than a restaurant, but they offer traditional American food, so we both settled for burgers and fries.

We finished our bottle of wine before the food arrived, and asked for another. "I don't care if we get tipsy tonight, do you?"

"I was planning on it," came Stephanie's reply.

The conversation shifted to how we maintain our feminine looks, hormones, hair removal, and other related topics. This was fun. I was having a conversation with another trans woman. It was so refreshing.

*

We tried, but we couldn't finish that second bottle of wine. We finished our dinners, we finished our drinks, we were both properly "buzzed," so we made our goodbyes. Before going our own separate ways, we exchanged contact information.

"Such a lovely evening," I said to Stephanie. "We should get together again – maybe up in New Brunswick."

"Lovely evening for me too. Let's plan on it..."

*

It had truly been a lovely evening. It felt so good to be with one of my people.

*

We exchanged contact information and started messaging and emailing each other. We shared secret thoughts; we had heady conversations; we got to know each other a lot better. And we both liked what we were seeing in each other. We developed a bond.

Chapter 48 – A Canadian Job Opportunity

Instead of messaging or emailing me, Stephanie called me from her office at the College of New Brunswick in Canada.

"Olivia," she said, somewhat excited. "I mentioned to the head of our Political Science department that I met you. He's Dr. Malcolm R. Doucet, and he says he'd love to meet you. And, get this, Professor Étienne Carreau has just announced that she is leaving our department bound for McGill in Montreal. So, we have an opening."

This sounded interesting. Me working in Canada. I could see it. "Do you think you could teach Canadian Political Science?" Stephanie asked.

I paused for a moment. Stephanie's statement was loaded with possibilities. A potential teaching offer. A question on where I could teach Canadian poli-sci. And, unstated, would I be interested in moving up to St. John, New Brunswick, where we could hang out together?

"I definitely could," I replied, informing her that I was part Canadian and understood how Canadian politics work. "You should know that my mother is Canadian — she was born on Deer Island in Passamaquoddy Bay. She and I paid close attention to Canadian politics as I grew up, so I, too, learned the system."

Stephanie was surprised by my answer. "So, are you a Canadian citizen also?"

"I never got around to applying for my citizenship, but I've been told it's very easy. I just have to come up with my mother's birth certificate and some other proof of her citizenship."

"We need to look into this," Stephanie stated, as if we were a team. *Interesting*, I thought. *Was Stephaine interested in becoming a close friend, a trans-duo?*

"Wow, Stephanie, I'm definitely interested in talking with Dr. Doucet about the position. So yes, I'd love to meet him. Now, as for teaching Canadian Political Science, what does your curriculum look like?"

"The Poli Sci department has four threads," Stephanie explained. "We teach about how our parliament, judiciary, political culture and elections work. I wouldn't expect you to know all of that stuff. I think you're more suited to the other three threads."

"Something international?" I asked.

"Right on target," she declared. "Cross-national comparative politics."

"Piece of cake," I responded. "I teach comparative politics now. Or, at least I did teach them."

"How about International Relations?" she asked.

"You mean stuff like global diplomacy, conflict, international organizations, and foreign policy?"

"That's pretty close to the direct wording of our syllabus. Yes, that's what I mean." She paused, "How about Political Theory?"

"You mean classical and modern political thought, ideologies, and normative frameworks?"

"Exactly," Stephanie replied. "Perfect then, when can you make it up here?"

I was highly interested in her offer. St. John is about three hours from here, maybe four. I can come up anytime."

"Okay, then, I'll get your interview set up."

"Do I have to learn to speak New Brunswickian?" I asked. "Do I have to end every sentence with 'eh,' and then interject 'sorry?'"

She acted confused for a second, then replied, "You Americans are such comedians..."

I corrected her statement. "Such comedians, eh."

*

Unsaid in the phone conversation that I had just had with Stephanie was what kind of relationship we both might have. I'm hoping for a fun-loving-friends relationship. We have much in common. It would be fun to go places, learn new things, and share experiences together.

I was truly intrigued by the way this situation was developing.

Chapter 49 – Mary the Reporter?

Mary's job search was unraveling faster than she expected, mostly because she refused to leave Maine. She had already reached out to the high school in Cumberland County — the one with the two transgender athletes whose story we had covered. The administrators remembered her, respected her, but had nothing to offer.

The private colleges in Bowdoin, Lewiston, and Waterville were no better. No openings. No retirements. No sabbaticals.

And then there was Bertrard College, practically in our backyard in Bangor. It would have been perfect for her — but again, nothing. It was becoming painfully clear that if Mary wanted to stay in Maine, she was going to be unemployed for a long time. That was when Alex proposed an idea that seemed, at first, almost too convenient.

*

PCPTV's management already knew Mary. They knew she was out of work. They knew she drew viewers. And they desperately needed more coverage of Maine's political landscape — coverage that was fast, sharp, and digital.

"Why not make Mary a reporter?" I asked my boss, program director Warren P. Lebold.

Warren didn't hesitate. He liked Mary. The whole station liked Mary.

"Does she even want to be a reporter?" Warren asked.

"I don't know," Alex admitted. "But I'll find out."

*

When Alex called, Mary didn't sound surprised. She already understood what the job required — quick thinking, fast writing, shooting and editing video on the fly. After the sheer volume of footage she had produced during the DEI and immigrant-rights protests, she knew she could handle the technical side.

"I might need some coaching on shaping news stories," she said.

"But yes — I could do this. Honestly, I'd love to. I need a change."

But did she really? Or was she really saying: *I'd love to, I need a job...*

*

I relayed her enthusiasm to management. They pulled together a request for additional funding and sent samples of Mary's recent work to their parent company, *Epoch Nexus Media Group*.

The reply came quickly.

"We love her," the executives said. "But we have to decline." Warren pushed back. "Why? She's articulate, smart, and our viewers already know her."

The answer was blunt.

"Because she will only appeal to half your audience. Her protest videos on DEI and immigration alienate the other half. Maine is divided. Hiring her would divide your viewership."

Warren didn't like the reasoning, but he couldn't deny it. The logic was cold, corporate, and unmovable. He passed the decision to Alex.

"Corporate won't approve the hire," Warren said. "They think her past activism makes her too polarizing."

Alex bristled. "I've produced dozens of stories on those same issues."

"Your stories are news," Warren replied. "Hers are calls to action. That's not the same thing."

The debate sputtered on for a few more minutes, but the outcome was already set. Corporate wasn't budging.

"I'll tell her," I said quietly.

*

Mary took the news with a steadiness that almost fooled him. "That's all right, Alex," she said. "I'll find something. No worries." But after she hung up, the silence around her felt heavier than before. And she was worried — more than she wanted anyone to know...

Chapter 50 – The Professorship

After two days in St. John, the time to meet Dr. Malcolm R. Doucet had finally arrived. I had done my research on him before driving up to St. John — a very accomplished man, an author of several books on the Canadian government policies and procedures, complete with in-depth analysis, and a PhD. He was clearly exceptionally bright.

After the initial pleasantries, we got down to business.

"Professor Thomaston," Dr. Doucet started, "I am aware of the books you have written, and I've also seen several of the research papers you have published over the years."

"It sounds like you've done your research, too," I said. "And, I'm currently working on another book," I told him. It's '*The Coming Fury: What the Conservative Court Will Do to America.*' I'm almost finished with this one."

"Delightful," Dr. Doucet replied. "Do you want to share a bit about what you're new book is about?"

So I did. I explained to him how it is organized, describing the collapse of our Judicial Branch combined with the collapse of our Legislative Branch, and how the Executive Branch had bent both branches to its will. I pointed out how America is now a broken country — but I confessed I did not yet know how to fix it.

He was on the edge of his seat for most of that discussion.

He also shared his view of the collapse of American democracy. He was seeing the same stuff I did. For half an hour, we exchanged ideas and shared perspectives. This interview was going splendidly.

"May I offer a word of advice?" Dr. Dochet asked as we concluded our discussion of my new book.

"By all means," I replied, thankful for the feedback.

"Well, it seems to me that you have a strong, anti-POTUS position. But all you're offering is what he, the Supreme Court and the legislative branches are doing wrong. You need to counterbalance your position with a few things that the new administration has done right."

Dr. Dochet was one hundred percent right. My book would come off like a rant unless I balanced it out. It was good, honest feedback and highly valuable to me. I thanked him sincerely for that piece of feedback.

*

Dr. Dochet then switched gears, asking me about all of the DEI and Immigrant videos that I had shot with Mary.

"Are you going to continue your video protests?" he asked.

"Unfortunately, no. I'm going to turn that over to my partner, Mary Shelley and the son of a captured immigrant whose name is Fernando Rodríguez Iglesias Candelaria, but we call him Tito for short." Dr. Dochet got a kick out of Tito's long name being shortened.

"I think that is probably a wise decision, dropping the video protests. Don't get me wrong, we love your activism, but between your book and teaching activities, you're going to be pretty busy."

"So, what kind of coursework did you have in mind? Are there specific courses that you want me to teach?" I asked.

"Should you be hired, I would like you to teach comparative politics and international politics courses."

"I can do that, I've been doing those courses for years down at my previous job," I replied, confident that I could use my existing course material, mix in some Canadian perspectives, and meet his course requirements.

*

We spent another twenty minutes discussing how his department worked, what his expectations were, my availability, and so on.

He also informed me that he still had other candidates to interview, but his decision would be forthcoming within a week. I left that interview feeling upbeat. There was potential for me to work at CNB. And, my fear that they would reject me because I am an American was unfounded. I think that my in-depth knowledge of the American political system actually serves to make me a very desirable candidate.

*

I met with two other professors and one administrator. The professors inquired about my latest research and described theirs. I think I passed muster with them. The administrator told me what it was like to move to and live in Canada, including the politics and taxes, and after that, I made my way back to Stephanie's place.

Chapter 51 – The Debrief

"You prepped me expertly," I told Stephanie when she arrived home from teaching her class. "I feel that my interviews went really well..."

I described the interview with Dr. Dochet, and described how he was highly interested in my new book. I had shared my new book project with Stephanie the day before over dinner at her place.

"You know, you're going to get hammered in taxes," Stephanie mentioned. "Your country insists that you pay taxes there, and we're going to collect taxes here. Taxes will take a big bite out of your paycheck."

I explained to Stephanie that the administrator had already walked me through that scenario.

Stephanie then made me an offer I couldn't refuse. "If you get that job, you must stay here with me for the first semester, until you get settled in this community. And for that matter, if you don't get the job, you must stay here so that you can write your book."

"I wouldn't want to impose," I responded.

"It would be no imposition at all..." She paused. "Alright then, let's celebrate!"

*

That night, for dinner, we went to the East Coast Bistro in the historic district of St. John.

"This is the closest thing we have to a fine French restaurant in St. John," Stephanie said after we were seated.

I looked around. This was not a fancy white tablecloth joint. It was more like a Parisian throwback — their dining room is styled around polished wood, exposed brick, and a clean, modern-bistro aesthetic rather than the classic gingham-check look associated with French cafés or taverns. It's an interpretation of a French

bistro with elegant place settings, intimate spacing — quietly elegant. The room hums softly with conversation, clinking glasses, and the kind of attentive service that makes you feel known even on your first visit.

The food can best be described as "French technique meets Maritime ingredients." The kitchen uses French cooking methods — slow braises, pan reductions, careful plating — but the meals are not really French, they're more based on local seafood and other local offerings.

The wine we ordered came quickly — and Stephanie did that bottled wine thing where she smelled the cork and swilled the wine in her glass before sipping it. It had passed muster — and was quite delicious.

For dinner, I was greatly tempted by the lamb prepared with French-style crusts, glazes, or bean ragouts. But the fresh halibut proved too tempting. I had seared halibut with beurre blanc and seasonal vegetables. Stephanie ordered the lamb — it looked scrumptious.

At dinner we talked about all there was to do in St. John. The museum, the container village, the breweries — and a glut of decent restaurants. "We're going to do them all," Stephanie promised.

I'm not big on deserts — they destroy my waistline — but I couldn't resist. I had my choice of a lemon tart or crème-inspired pastry. I went with the tart.

All-in-all, I found that the servers were intimately familiar with the menu and the cooking methods, they were knowledgeable and efficient. It was as if they actually enjoyed presenting the restaurant's dishes to us.

If this job works out, I knew I was going to have a splendid time getting to know Stephanie and St. John better.

Chapter 52 – The Offer

The day after my interview with Dr. Dochet, and after Stephanie and my evening celebration, I returned home to Bangor.

A week later, I heard from Dr. Dochet. It was good news. I got the job!

*

"Professor Thomason, it is with great pleasure that the College of New Brunswick offers you the position of professor of Political Science at our St. John Campus."

"Dr. Douchet, I am honored," I responded, joyfully.

"Outstanding," he replied. He told me how much he enjoyed our discussion and how he was looking forward to having many more in the future. He also told me that my extracurricular activities, such as making protest videos, had worked in my favor because faculty and staff felt from those videos as if they knew me, even though they did not meet me in person. They liked my personality and my strong commitment to protesting American injustices. But the thing the Doctor was most looking forward to, and I had the necessary insight, was a description of the breakdown of the American government.

When our call was over, I thought about moving to Canada. Teaching in St. John. Getting to know St. John and New Brunswick better. And getting to know Stephanie better. I was looking forward to this change in my life.

*

I called Stephanie shortly after I accepted the offer. I was about to embark on a new chapter in life, and she would be a big part of my latest endeavor. I thanked her for finding this teaching opportunity for me.

It was then time to break the news to Mary.

Chapter 53 – Telling Mary

Mary was home when the job offer came in. She was sitting at our dining room table, using her laptop to search for other teaching positions for herself. I walked over and sat next to her.

"Mary, I got the CNB job," I delightedly told her. She beamed.

"Olivia, that's fantastic news! Teaching in Canada sounds like quite the adventure." She was being genuine, it was going to be a big change for me.

When do you start?"

"I'll be staying, at least temporarily, at Stephanie's place up in St. John, so I can leave anytime." Mary was aware that I had befriended Stephanie and that Stephanie helped me find that job. I think, however, that she viewed Stephanie as her "replacement."

"Classes start the second week of September," I continued. "So I've got just over a month to pack my bags and move up there."

Mary knew that we were on a path to a split-up. But now, the thought of our separation became all too real.

"Oh, Olivia," she mourned, "I'm going to miss being with you. You're a big part of my life, my best friend."

"And you're of mine," I assured her. "But remember, I'll only be three and a half hours away. I can easily come back to Bangor any time I want, and you can come visit me in St. John whenever you wish."

"We'll get together regularly," I promised.

We had both come to the realization that we would no longer be living together, cooking together, debating together, working together. And that hurt. It hurt both of us.

Mary cried.

So did I.

Chapter 54 – Last Minute Luck

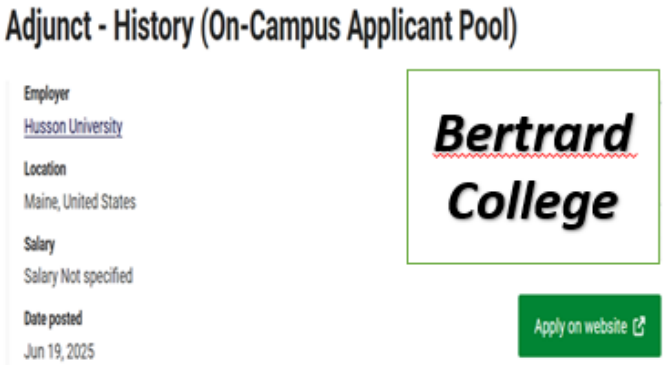
Having failed to find a history teaching job in the Bangor area, I expanded my search to Southern Maine. Nothing.

Alex had attempted to get me a job at PCPTV — no go. Olivia had found gainful employment at the College of New Brunswick in Canada. She promised to look for teaching opportunities there, but I had no interest in moving to New Brunswick. All my friends are in Bangor; Bangor is my home.

And what about Alex?

*

I was now resorting to searching for high school positions in the Bangor area. And then a part-time opportunity teaching history surfaced only ten miles away at Bertrard College. I found it on the Bertrard College's employment page:



A part-time position might work! I thought. That would give me time to continue my anti-immigrant detention efforts with Tito and Alex. That might work very well indeed. I dug further for the job description:

Description
Husson's College of Science and Humanities is seeking to compile a pool of qualified candidates interested in future part-time teaching opportunities in History. Such opportunities are dependent upon the needs of the University. Assignments may require teaching day or evening classes as needed. Interested applicants who have previously applied for the History adjunct pool should resubmit materials to this new posting.

Note: This is a face-to-face position; instructors are expected to be on campus.

Examples of Duties
The instructor is responsible for preparing and conducting classes, preparing and grading assignments, and holding weekly office hours with students.

The College of Science and Humanities is seeking adjuncts to teach the following courses:

HY 101: Western Civilization
HY 102: Early World Civilization
HY 103: Modern World Civilization
HY 111: U.S. History I to 1877
HY 112: U.S. History II since 1877
HY 211: American National Government
HY 213: State and Local Government
HY 301: Twentieth Century History

Typical Qualifications
Master's degree in History or a closely related discipline is required. A PhD is preferred.

I meet the requirements, except for the PhD. But what PhD would look for a part-time teaching position in Bangor anyway? I knew the people in the history department at Bertrard; they knew I was looking for a job. I was surprised that they hadn't called me to let me know about this one. So, I gave them a call to ascertain what was going on.

*

I spoke with Jordan Reyes, the head of the History Department at Bertrard.

"Jordy," I opened, as we spoke on the phone. "This is Mary Shelley, formerly of The College of Maine."

Jordy laughed at my introduction, the "formerly of the 'College of Maine' part." He knew the whole story about what happened to Olivia and me at The College of Maine, and we had talked briefly shortly after my dismissal. There were, at the time of our last conversation, no history teaching positions available.

"Mary! To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Jordy, I was just reading the job posting from Bertrard for a part-time History teaching opportunity. Do you think it would be something that I'd be interested in?"

"Gosh, Mary, it never even occurred to me to contact you about it. You know it's part-time, right?"

"I do. And that's why it interests me. That would give me an income while I continue doing the immigrant protest work that Olivia and I started."

I paused. Should I tell him about Olivia's new job? I held off on that.

"Well, gee, Mary — this position would be a piece of cake for you. You'd be teaching Western Civ, and American National Government. You could do those in your sleep."

I agreed, it would be a piece of cake for me. I've already got a course syllabus for both courses.

"Well, Jordy, I've looked all over for full-time positions elsewhere, to no avail. And part-time work might suit me better anyway. What's the pay?" I asked.

"We pay $60 to $75 per hour — that's about $974 per week."
I quickly did the math. That's a grand a week times fifteen weeks a semester, plus a week each semester for final exams. That's 32 weeks of teaching, or $32K per year. Can I get by on $32K per year? Maybe?"

"Interesting," I said. "Is the position still open?"

"It is, and we're getting a little desperate. Classes begin in three weeks, and we haven't settled on a selection yet."

"Would you be interested in hiring me?" I asked.

"Are you kidding?" Jordy asked. "Our first day of classes is September 2nd. Would that work for you?"

"What, you don't want me to come in for an interview?" I asked.

"I've known you for a decade; I know your credentials; I know your job history — the only interview you'd have to do is at human resources, filling out all of the paperwork. Are you interested?"

"You bet I am," I said as I accepted Jordy's offer.

"I'll let HR know to expect you. This is exciting — let's get together and celebrate. When are you free?"

"Tonight would be fine," I told Jordy, and his schedule was open, too.

"Where should we go?" I asked?

"How about Pat's Pizza?"

Why is it I always end up at Pat's? I wondered.

*

With Olivia moving to Canada, she would have to sell her house. She was in the process of putting it on the market, but she told me I was welcome to live there until it sold. That would give me a few months, I was sure. The salary from Bertrard would work if I found a cheap place to live and got a roommate. Ecch. Perish the thought. But it is what it is.

*

I told Olivia shortly after my phone call with Jordy. And then I called Alex.

*

"I've gotten a job over at Bertrard. It's part-time, but it will pay the bills. Plus, that will enable me to keep working on our immigration videos, if you're still signed up to do that," I gleefully informed Alex.

"Well, first, congratulations. That's excellent. And second, of course, I want to keep working with you," he enthusiastically said.

But there was something in his tone. He sounded relieved that we could continue working together. *Come on, Alex, make your move!*

Chapter 55 – Back in the Picture

That night, Jordy brought me an official offer letter and contract. We shared a half pepperoni, half anchovy pizza. The kitchen staff probably thought that our pizza order was bizarre — who eats pepperoni and anchovies in the same sitting?

It was really quite good...

*

The following day, I got a call from Alex. He had some video ideas that he wanted to discuss with me. "How about we get together for pizza tonight? Maybe we could go to Pats?"

ARRRRGH!
What is with guys these days — all they want to eat is pizza and drink beer. And Pat's again? Not happening.

"How about we go back to Mason's Brewery. We've been there before and had a lovely time. And we had plenty of privacy to work on one of our first videos. Let's do that," I suggested.

"Done, it's a date," Alex affirmed. We picked a time and planned to meet at Mason's.

*

He really is driving me up the wall. "It's a DATE???" Is it, or is it not?

I'm going to resolve this. TONIGHT!

Chapter 56 – The Book: The "Supreme" Court

While Mary was out with Alex, I finally had an uninterrupted evening to return to my book — the one charting the increasingly volatile triangle between the Supreme Court, Congress, and the Presidency.

My goal was to better balance my book — make it less whiney, more balanced.

Dr. Dochet's advice kept ringing in my ear. "Your position is clear—you're deeply critical of the President. But you can't just catalogue what he and the Court are doing wrong. You need to acknowledge anything they've done right."

It was a fair point. But it was also a maddeningly difficult assignment.

I stared at the blank page, trying to summon something — anything — positive. But I have never witnessed a Supreme Court so aligned with a President steering the country down an authoritarian path. Fifteen consecutive wins for him. Fifteen! And more cases queued up like planes on a runway, waiting for clearance to take off. How was I supposed to find a silver lining in that?

From my perspective, the Court wasn't checking him; it was enabling him.

The clearest example, of course, was the immunity ruling. When the Court granted the President broad protection from prosecution, it effectively placed him above the law. Except in rare circumstances, prosecutors can no longer pursue constitutional violations committed while he was in office. The Court didn't just tilt the balance of power — they handed him a crown.

The ruling broke down like this:

- Absolute immunity for actions within the President's exclusive constitutional authority (pardons, military

command, execution of laws).
- Presumptive immunity for all other official acts.
- No immunity for unofficial acts, even if performed while in office.

In practice, this ruling means every public official in the United States can be prosecuted for crimes committed in office — except the President. A king in all but name.

I tried — truly tried — to find something positive to say about this. But the ruling is so sweeping, so alien to American constitutional values, that I came up empty.

So I moved on.

*

Next, I turned my attention to the President's Executive Order attempting to curtail birthright citizenship. If the Supreme Court ultimately upholds the Fourteenth Amendment's clear language, that would be a rare bright spot. They would actually tell POTUS "no."

As of yet, there has been no ruling. For now, the silence is deafening.

*

I looked more closely at the POTUS Executive Order on birthright citizenship. It instructs federal agencies to deny citizenship documents to children born here if:

- The mother is unlawfully present and the father is not a citizen or lawful permanent resident.
- The mother is lawfully present only temporarily, and the father is not a citizen or green-card holder.

In short, POTUS is trying to graft new qualifiers onto an amendment that has none. Born here or not. That should be it.

The Court's refusal to intervene leaves the President free to keep testing the boundaries of a constitutional guarantee.

Nothing positive there either.

*

Can I find something positive to say about the Supreme Court giving POTUS the authority to dismiss members of federal agencies. On the surface, I could support trimming government bloat and reassessing outdated agencies. That part made sense.

But the ruling didn't stop at efficiency. It effectively granted the President the power to fire agency heads at will — including watchdogs — for any reason.

With the Supreme Court's affirmation that POTUS can fire anyone he wants, he wasted no time. He dismissed the *Commissioner of the Bureau of Labor Statistics* after the agency revised job numbers downward. A politically motivated firing, clearing the way for the administration to control economic messaging.

The only positive thing I can say about this Supreme Court ruling is this: "*be careful what you wish for.*" With this ruling, should the Republicans get voted out of Congressional control, and if a new Democrat is selected as our next president, the new president will have the authority to clear out Republican sycophants. *What goes around comes around...*

*

After hours of reviewing recent Supreme Court decisions, the pattern was unmistakable. Fifteen straight victories for the President. A Court that seems less interested in reflecting the will of the American people and more intent on facilitating a sweeping conservative restructuring of the federal government.

I struggled. I found nothing good to say about the performance of the U.S. Supreme Court...

Chapter 57 – A Relationship?

Alex and I were out on yet another "date" — though neither of us had ever dared to call it that out loud.

"So much is happening at once," I told him. "I finally have a teaching job here in Bangor. Olivia's moving to New Brunswick. I'm taking full control of our immigration protests. And you're asking for more videos. I love being busy, I'm very happy right now."

"I'm really glad for you," Alex said, and he meant it. "Not having a job was weighing on you. You seem lighter than you did after PCPTV passed on you."

"I am," I admitted. "Much better."

The waitress arrived. I ordered a Pinot Grigio; Alex ordered Mason's 1320 IPA — a New England-style IPA, naturally. Beer. Why do men always default to beer? The waitress disappeared, and with her went my fleeting courage.

*

I had come prepared to ask him the question I'd been carrying for weeks: Why do you keep pulling back? He brings us right to the edge of something—something warm, something real — and then retreats as if he's touched a live wire.

But the timing wasn't right. Not yet. I needed him relaxed, open. Not braced.

*

The waitress returned with our drinks and asked about food. "Not yet," I said. "Maybe later."

We slid into business mode, the safest territory we shared. The next video would focus on the new revelations about prisoner treatment at Alligator Alcatraz.

"This is sick," I said after we compared notes. "We're Americans. And we're torturing thousands of innocent people. Sick!"

"Our Miami office is tracking down more former contractors," Alex said. "We've also got reporters heading to Louisiana, Texas, New York — anywhere these prisons are operating. Once we have the full picture, we'll be doing a whole show. And I want you in it. It'll give you national exposure."

"I'm in," I said without hesitation.

"And Tito's helping me find local families whose loved ones were taken by ICE. I'd like you on that one too."

"Absolutely."

*

We kept talking. Neither of us was hungry, but Alex eventually ordered nachos. We picked at them, more out of habit than appetite. By then we'd been at Mason's for an hour. The conversation had softened. The edge was gone. The air between us felt warm, unguarded.

It was time.

Chapter 58 – The Big Reveal

"Alex, I need to ask you something... personal."

He blinked, startled. We weren't supposed to go there. We were the business-only duo — safe, controlled, predictable.

"Shoot," he said, though his voice had tightened.

"Why doesn't a guy like you have a girlfriend? You're tall, handsome, smart. Women must line up."

His whole body changed — like someone had flipped a switch. His shoulders stiffened, jaw set, arms crossing in a barricade.

"If you don't want to answer, it's okay," I said. "I'm not trying to pry."

"It's just... I'm busy," he said.

A flimsy excuse. Olivia had already told me the truth: he used work as a shield.

"I see," I murmured.

But before I could retreat, he leaned forward.

"Then let me ask you something. Why don't you date? You're beautiful. You could have anyone."

My breath caught. I hated that question. Hated the memories it dragged up. But if I wanted honesty from him, I had to offer mine.

I lowered my voice.

"Ten years ago, I was married..." The story spilled out — the addiction, the beatings, the night he broke my collarbone, the overdose that ended everything. I hadn't spoken it aloud in years. Not like this.

When I finished, I was shaking. Alex didn't hesitate. He slid into my side of the booth and wrapped his arms around me.

"Mary... I've known about this for quite some time." When he finally pulled back, his face was pale. He looked like a man carrying a secret he no longer wanted.

I was shocked. "You've known?" I paused to think this through. *How could he have known? The only person who knows about my battered woman syndrome is Olivia! And she has been sworn to secrecy!*

"Olivia," I said out loud. Angrily.

Chapter 59 – A Promise Broken

"I've known for a long time," Alex said, fingers brushing mine. "About what you went through. Olivia told me. Not everything — not like you just did — but enough."

My stomach dropped. "What did she say?"

"She made me swear I wouldn't tell you she'd told me," he admitted. "She said you still flinch if someone moves too fast. That you apologize during arguments to avoid escalation. She said it was... a trauma response."

He swallowed. "And she told me about the *Color Purple* incident."

"She did not." My voice cracked. Shame and anger surged up so fast I felt dizzy.

Olivia had promised — *promised* — that my past would stay between us. That it was mine to share or not share. And she had handed it to Alex like gossip.

But the betrayal went deeper.

She hadn't just revealed my history. She had used it.

She had taken one painful moment — what we call the *Color Purple Incident* — and turned it into evidence that I was too fragile for a relationship. She used it as proof that I was unstable. That I was temperamental. Someone who might explode. Someone who shouldn't be approached romantically.

She had made me look broken.

And suddenly everything made sense.

Alex's caution. His distance. His hesitations.

He hadn't been rejecting me. He'd been warned about me.

hypocrisy!

*

No wonder Alex has always treated me with kid-gloves. Olivia has made it seem like I am unstable. OMG: this is precisely why Alex has steered clear of me! He's been told that I'm damaged goods. Olivia essentially warned Alex not to approach me in a romantic manner, or he would upset me. It would damage me – it would make me regress. Or it would set me off! It was Olivia, all along, who had prevented Alex and I from developing a relationship.

Chapter 60 – The Color Purple Incident

It took a minute for me to compose myself. So now, what was my next step? I could deny that The Color Purple Incident never happened. But it did. And this meant that I now had to explain the incident to Alex. I dreaded having to dredge up this story of my meltdown.

*

I started with an explanation of battered woman syndrome. "It's very much like post-traumatic stress disorder," I hesitantly explained. I did not want to have this discussion with Alex. "It is a mental health condition triggered by being beaten by a partner." I just told Alex that I have a mental health condition. Now he'll never want to have anything to do with me...

"Alex, to treat this condition, I went through years of therapy. In treatment, you learn behaviors to deal with your reflexive protective reactions to fast movements that are seemingly aimed at you, but, in reality, are not. You also learn behaviors to help you deal with stress and anxiety. And they try to teach you to stop reacting with apologies for disagreements or conflicts that are not your fault. And, now, I do pretty well with all of these situations. But, on rare occasions, I react in fear. And that's what happened when Olivia and I sat down one evening to watch one of her DVDs, *The Color Purple*."

"She told me you freaked out and that she was very concerned about your well-being. She suggested that you are very fragile, and that I should not push you into any sort of romantic relationship."

"She told you I was unstable. And 'nuts?'" I asked to confirm Olivia's language and description of me.

"More like 'damaged' and 'vulnerable.'"

I was disappointed on oh so many levels. She had violated my trust. She had profoundly disappointed me. She had stabbed me in the back. She had interfered with my personal life and my desire to form a relationship.

*

What was the *Color Purple* incident?

Olivia likes to watch old movies. She has a vast collection of old Blu-rays and DVDs, and she enjoys finding obscure movies to watch with me. The movie she had chosen to watch that night was "The Color Purple." It was in her collection, still wrapped in cellophane, so she had never seen it. She knew the movie had been nominated for a slew of Academy Awards, including *Best Picture*, *Best Actress*, *Best Supporting Actress*, and more. "Let's check this out," she had said to me. I, too, had never seen it, so I agreed.

It was a total disaster. The movie reveals that Celie, the main character, had been raped by her stepfather and had borne two children accordingly. The children were subsequently taken from her. Though I didn't like the start of the movie, I hung in there. I was familiar with many movies that have rape or incest scenes. Movies like *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, *Precious*, or *The Accused*. In *The Accused*, Jodie Foster won an Oscar for her performance. So, I was willing to watch *The Color Purple* to see why it had garnered so many nominations.

The movie started out engaging, but it quickly turned into an emotional disaster. It went from rape to wife abuse, with Celie being beaten by the man she had married. Too close. Way too close! I had lived through that – it was a scene that attacked my inner self.

BOOM! came the first blow.

Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!

It was like every time Celie was struck, I was being assaulted. I raised my arms to defend myself; I ducked my head. And then I SCREAMED!

Olivia immediately realized what was happening and shut down the movie. I stood up, prepared to run out of the room and seek

shelter. But then I collapsed back on the couch. I froze. I went catatonic. My eyes were open, but I could not move; I couldn't see. I couldn't speak. I was frozen. I was rigid. And I remained so for half an hour. Olivia tried to revive me; she wanted to get me back. But I failed to respond to any stimuli. She quickly called an ambulance.

At the hospital, I was diagnosed with catatonia. I was given a high dose of a benzodiazepine. It revived me, but I was kept overnight in the hospital for "observation."

It shouldn't have happened — but it did. In therapy, I had been taught ways to handle my anxiety. But the movie sequence had changed so quickly; the wife-beating came so rapidly and so unexpectedly that it shocked me. I wasn't ready for it. And it scared me, which is why I went into shock.

*

I told Alex everything that I could recall.

"It has never happened again," I informed Alex. "It was a random, unpredictable happenstance. So yes, I did freak out, but no, I'm not nuts. I just avoid putting myself in that position. And as long as I am vigilant about it, I'm fine."

"I'm so sorry," Alex responded, and hugged me. I put my head on his shoulder. We hugged for a long while.

Chapter 61 – Now What?

At the end of the evening, I didn't want to return home to Olivia. I was too upset with her. A confrontation was on the horizon, and, thanks to being battered in a previous life, I don't handle confrontations well.

It came time to leave Mason's, so Alex paid the bill and escorted me to my car.

I wondered what was going through Alex's head. Did he honestly think I was nuts? He answered that question moments later.

*

"Mary, you're on edge, you're tense — and heading back home to Olivia, I think, is not a good idea at this moment."

He knew exactly how I was feeling! And he's empathizing with me. In his eyes, I was not damaged goods. He was concerned about me.

"Why don't you come over to my place?" Alex offered. "I've got a spare room that you can use. And I've told Milpita, my dog, all about you. He's dying to meet you."

He was trying to lighten up the situation by applying humor. I could see him talking to his dog about me. It was funny, and I needed a boost.

I accepted.

*

Wow, what a reception I got when we crossed the threshold into Alex's home. Milpita incessantly barked at me, a continuous stream of alarm barks — he was not about to cut me a break. "*What are you doing in my house?*"

Alex picked him up to calm him down. However, because he was being held, he began whining and crying with excitement. It was the kind of crying/whining that a dog does when he wants to be with you — when he wants your attention.

Alex put him down on the floor. He rushed over to me, starting to jump up and down, pinging off of me, begging me to pick him up — to hold him. I picked him up, and we sat on Alex's couch. He then started licking me. He was getting the attention he craved. And he had made a new best friend.

*

Alex took me on a tour of his home, showed me where everything was, and escorted me to his spare bedroom.

He and I wished each other goodnight and we each went our own separate ways.

I was tired. I felt like my energy had been sapped from me. I was terribly disappointed with Olivia. Her betrayal was hitting me hard. And I was embarrassed. Alex now knows a secret in my life that I wish I could keep to myself forever.

I disrobed down to my panties and lay in bed thinking about the situation that had transpired that evening.

*

Why had Olivia ratted me out? Why had she told Alex my secret, and then not told me that she had told him? I thought about that for a long while, and the scenario I came up with was quite disturbing.

*

As I thought about Olivia and my relationship, I came to realize that Olivia had manipulated me! *She didn't want any competitors; she wanted me to herself!*

Olivia had told Alex about my temperament problems. She had told him about my emotional reactivity and my reactions to certain stimuli. She had clearly discussed my anxiety control issues, my need to control impulses and manage my emotions. She had portrayed me as a nutcase. And based on her advice, Alex had taken a complete "hands-off" attitude toward me.

*

I decided to fix this situation right then and there. I got up, took my panties off, and went down the hall to Alex's room. I knocked, opened the door, and went in.

Chapter 62 – The Offer

When we awoke the next morning, I was on the left side of the bed, Alex was on the right. And between us, facing upwards, paws tucked in, head pointed at the ceiling, lay Mlpita.

I moved slightly, and Mlpita awakened immediately. I had the feeling that he was waiting for me to wake up. He rolled over quickly and crawled up on me, lying across my chest with his snout in my face. He tried to lick me, but I moved him down a bit so that long tongue of his couldn't reach me. Our jostling awakened Alex.

*

"Good morning, beautiful," Alex said as he flipped over to look at Mlpita and I.

"Good morning back," I said as Mlpita hopped off of me and went over to Alex for a morning greeting.

"Are you okay?" Alex asked. I wasn't sure if he was referring to my situation with Olivia or to what we had done last night.
I was more than okay! That was my first time in a decade, and it felt wonderful. Alex and I had finally connected.

"I'm more than okay," I answered, as I kissed him.

A while later, Alex, Mlpita and I got up. "Mind if I use your shower?" I asked.

"By all means," came Alex's reply. I think he was hoping to join me, but I didn't offer. He provided me with a toothbrush and toothpaste, gave me his bathrobe, put on a pair of undershorts, and went downstairs to let Mlpita out and to cook our breakfast.

"How do you like your eggs?" he asked.

"Sunnyside."

I felt splendid!

*

After my shower, I went back to my room and dressed. I thought about Alex and Mlpita, and how they needed a woman in their lives. I thought about myself and the forthcoming changes in my life. And with Olivia moving to Canada, I would be losing my closest friend. My former closest friend. Would Alex become my new best friend?

*

Bacon, eggs and those tiny link sausages. A lot of them.

"Looks like you eat a lot of sausages," I remarked, smiling at Alex.

"Not me," he defended himself, "Mlpita is the sausage hound."

"*Sausage? – Did someone say 'sausage,*" Milpita thought.

"Beg," Alex said. On cue, Mlpita sat on his hind legs, curled his paws into a begging position, and barked.

"Good boy!" Alex encouraged, holding a small link about four feet off the ground.

Mlpita leaped, snatched the sausage, and wolfed it down. Alex put several more in his bowl, then served us.

The bacon and eggs really hit the spot. I hadn't eaten much at Mason's, so I was starving. We sat at the table and shared what lay ahead that day for both of us.

And then Alex laid it on me!

*

"I hope you don't think I'm being too forward," Alex started, "But I've been thinking. Olivia is putting her house on the market, so you'll have to vacate when she sells it."

I immediately figured out where he was going with this conversation — and I was excited.

So, I was thinking, I have a spare bedroom," he started, "And Mlpita likes you. So, we're more than willing to share our spare bedroom with you, if you like."

I wasn't quite flabbergasted, but I was darn close. We had just gone from friends to lovers – and now, we were considering living together. Wow, that was fast!

I had a clever response to his offer.

"Spare bedroom hell!"

Chapter 63 – See Ya…

My anger at Olivia did not dissipate by the time I arrived home. In fact, it never dissipated. She had used me. She had deceived me. In her quest to lock me in, she had prevented me from establishing a romantic relationship with Alex. I wanted nothing more to do with Olivia. Not now, not never.

*

As luck would have it, Olivia had gone up to St. John for the weekend to be with her new friend, Stephanie. Now was the perfect time for a move…

I called Alex, and Alex volunteered to help me relocate. Alex rented a cargo van from *Home Depot*, the kind of van people use to haul goods they bought at Home Depot to their homes. It was dirt cheap, $19 to rent it for seventy-five minutes, and then $5 for every fifteen minutes thereafter.

Before renting the truck, Alex came over to Olivia's house, where I had started moving my belongings from the basement to the garage. He helped me with the heavy stuff.

I packed everything else into plastic garbage bags. Doing all this pre-move work meant that all we had to do was back the van into the driveway, load it up, and take my stuff to Alex's house.

We estimated that it would take fifteen minutes to get the van to Alex's house from Home Depot in Bangor; forty-five minutes to load it with the big stuff in the garage; about twenty minutes to drive to Alex's place, thirty minutes to put all the big things into Alex's garage; and another fifteen minutes to return the van to Home Depot.

All told, the move would cost $19 for the first seventy-five minutes, and maybe $30 for the extra rental time. Shockingly, we managed to keep to the schedule.

*

As I settled-in at Alex's place, I commandeered the large closet in spare bedroom, placing my wardrobe and personal items in it.

Just to be clear, Alex's spare bedroom was my "*staging area*." I had no intention of sleeping alone in that room... My new life, my new relationship, had just begun. I would spend my nights with Alex in "*our*" bedroom.

*

When Olivia returned the following Monday, she found my room empty, became alarmed, and immediately called me.

"Mary, what's happened?" Olivia, confused, asked. "You've moved out." She had a bit of panic in her voice, obviously distressed by my sudden departure.

"I've moved in with Alex," I point-blank told her.

"What?" was her high-pitched, surprised response. "How come? Did I do something wrong?"

She did not know quite yet that I now despised her.

"Olivia, you told Alex that I was nuts, damaged goods, unstable. And for that reason, Alex, for months, stayed away from a romantic relationship with me. You manipulated me such that you could have me to yourself."

"I did no such thing," Olivia insisted.

"You told him about *The Color Purple* Incident. You were trying to keep him away from me. You positioned me as unstable. And, accordingly, he stayed away from me."

"Yes, I did tell Alex about that," she reluctantly admitted. "But I didn't do that to control you or lock you into me. I was just trying to forewarn Alex in case you started acting whacky? I wanted him to understand you better. I don't know what to say, Mary. I just wanted him to understand your situation."

I let Olivia have it. I was seething mad. "Olivia, you could clearly see that he was interested in me — and you didn't like that. You wanted to capture me; you wanted me all to yourself. You even

made it seem that he didn't want to be in relationships because he didn't want a companion. You told me how he gets rid of girlfriends by feigning that he's too busy at work. You manipulated me!"

Olivia considered what I had just said. *Had I selfishly manipulated Mary — or not? And if so, did I do it on purpose or was it inadvertent?*

"Mary, I'm sorry that you feel this way. I don't see my behavior as manipulation — I see it as protecting you from hurt."

"That's horseshit," I responded. "And I really have nothing more to say to you. Have fun up there in St. John with your new girlfriend — I'm now, officially, out of the picture! I never want to speak with you again!"

With that, I terminated our phone call.

Chapter 64 – Introspection

I wandered through my newly vacated house.

Had I really done something wicked to Mary? Did I purposely manipulate my best friend?

"*I've really screwed this up*," she admitted to herself. "*Now, I'll never see Mary again*."

Feeling of regret, anguish, guilt, and shame crashed in on me. I was overcome with sadness and grief.

I teared up and cried, with deep sobs of contrition.

*

I thought about the situation I was in, and my mind jumped to a film about a master manipulator. *Play Misty for Me* surfaced — that story of a radio DJ whose casual fling curdles into obsession. The woman in the film starts with charm, then slides into possessiveness, then into full-blown manipulation and stalking.

And I found myself wondering, uncomfortably:

Was I her?

Was I the one tightening the net?

Had I become possessive without realizing it?

*

As I, heartbroken, prepared for bed, I thought about all of the good times that I had had with Mary. All of the meals we cooked together, all of the movies we had watched, all of the political debates we had had. Our protest activities... And I came to realize that those deep, interpersonal experiences would be no more — all was now gone. Mary had shut me out... And, I knew with her, there was no going back.

Chapter 65 – A Reasonable Basis

After Mary and I broke up, I no longer wanted to remain in Bangor. I called Stephanie and told her what had happened.

"She believes that I manipulated her to control her."

"Did you?" Stephanie asked.

"I did no such thing. I told Alex about her battered woman syndrome so that he could understand her better. She, he, and I were doing a lot of working together; I just wanted him to be aware of her sensitivities."

"That seems like a reasonable thing to do," Stephanie observed.

"I just don't understand how this got so out of hand," I said. "We were like two peas in a pod one day, and then on completely different pages the next. She won't even discuss this situation further — she has completely cut me off."

*

I considered Olivia's situation. Her best friend had just dumped her. And the circumstance was unusual. *Why had Mary had such a visceral reaction to Olivia?* I wondered.

Have I just made a colossal mistake inviting Olivia to stay with me? She and I were just getting to know each other; and we had only spent a few days together before I invited her to stay with me in St. John. *Have I just allowed a manipulative narcissist into my life?*

I reconsidered. I knew Olivia well enough that I felt her pain. I could tell that she was bewildered and hurt by Mary's rejection. I asked myself: *"Or is this truly a complete misunderstanding?"*

"*Only time will tell*," I concluded. For the time being, I will offer Olivia my support. *But my antennae are up; I will be hyper-alert for any controlling behavior on Olivia's part.*

I continued to evaluate my situation. *I enjoy Olivia's company —*

and she enjoys mine. We respect each other intellectually. And we both understand what it is like to be trans in today's world. I believe that we have a reasonable basis on which to build a lasting friendship.

Chapter 66 – Canada Bound!

My house in Bangor was on the market for only two weeks before it sold. I needed to move quickly to be in St. John in time to start my courseload, so I rapidly closed the sale of my home.

"What am I going to do with all of this stuff?" I asked myself as I surveyed the amount of junk I had collected over the years. It will be impractical to move all of my furniture and belongings to Canada. First, I'd have to deal with customs duties; second, I'd have to put it in storage; and third, if my relationship with Stephanie lasts, I'd not need all of my furniture, pots, pans, artwork, etc.

In Maine, what do people usually do with a house full of goods they no longer want? Estate sale!

*

There were some items that I wished to take to Canada with me. Primarily clothing, movies, books and personal items. To get those items into Canada, I simply needed to present a list of my belongings to customs. They would check my declaration list with the items in my car, and as long as I wasn't bringing anything of great value across the border — like a Pierre-Auguste Renoir painting or something — I would be allowed to bring those items into the country duty-free. Anything really valuable would be taxed.

*

Estate sale day arrived. I hit social media, *Nextdoor*, *Facebook Marketplace*, *Craig's List*, et al, to let locals know that I massive yard sale — and that everything must go.

I lucked out. The weather was perfect; I attracted a brisk crowd; and I sold off almost everything I owned. The stuff that I didn't sell I gave to charity.

*

The move went smoothly — my new life now lay before me.

Chapter 67 – Serendipity

I like writing books, reports, blogs, and research papers on politics. And, as I looked at the mountain of research I needed to do to build a comparative governments course for my *International Politics* class, I realized I could turn my research into a new book. A very timely book. It would be about the current trade problem taking place between the U.S. and Canada. But I could also cover the differences between the U.S. government and Canada from other perspectives, such as activities in each country's energy sector, and differences in each country's approach freedom of speech and human rights. And more.

I speculated that a book on U.S./Canada relations written by a respected Poli-sci teacher and recognized protester of POTUS policies would be a hot commodity. And being in Canada at this point in history, where I could interact with and learn from real Canadians and their politicians, would likely give me some new insights. It would be an excellent, timely book. Maybe even a best seller. My working title for this new book would be: "*International Politics: The POTUS War with Canada*."

*

There were eight topics I wished to cover in my course:

1. Global Governance;
2. International Relations Theory;
3. Diplomacy and Foreign Relations;
4. Conflict and security;
5. International law;
6. Economic relationships;
7. Environmental politics; and,
8. Human rights.

I planned to teach these eight topics over a fifteen-week semester, which meant I had about two weeks to devote to each subject. I was in the right place at the right time to write this book. It was going to be a good one!

Chapter 68 – The Course Outline: Governance

Now that I had chosen the eight areas upon which I would focus, it came time for me to outline what I wanted to talk about in each area.

*

I decided to open with a discussion of the political science foundations of governance — the big theoretical lenses that explain why states behave the way they do. Realism, liberalism, constructivism, and the critical theories that challenge them. With a basic grasp of these theorems, students could put international politics into a coherent frame, seeing patterns where before there had only been headlines and noise. They could begin to understand not just what nations do, but why they do it — the assumptions, fears, incentives, and identities that drive global behavior.

I thought a little bit more about how I was going to organize this class. Going through these theories are key to understanding how governments work. Discussing them is therefore, necessarily unavoidable... But, let's be honest, not exactly the material that keeps students on the edge of their seats. I'd have to find a way to make the abstract feel alive, maybe by tying each theory to a current crisis or a headline that my students would recognize.

What I really wanted to teach was: *the world as it is right now, and the diverging paths the United States and Canada are taking across the seven major pillars of international politics.* I would find ways to bend my teaching in that direction.

*

For my first class I decided to begin with a discussion of what holds the global governance system together – the *United Nations*, the *World Trade Organization*, the *International Monetary Fund*. Then I would pose the question that really matters: *What happens when the major powers stop playing by the rules they helped design?* These bodies don't function on goodwill alone; they depend on participation, legitimacy, and a shared belief that rules constrain even the powerful.

And I had a perfect example of what happens when these bodies are not functioning the way they should. Given the United States' withdrawals and deliberate disengagement from several of these institutions, I could show students why the ways that we govern ourselves are not abstract technicalities but the scaffolding that *keeps the international order from collapsing* into rivalry, improvisation, and raw power.

*

Now that I had an idea of how I would open the course, I turned my attention to the next segment of my course, "*diplomacy and foreign policy*." Here, I'd trace the long arc of U.S./Canada relations, from cooperation to the recent tensions reshaping the partnership. Students needed to see how foreign policy isn't just strategy — it's identity, history, and political culture colliding on the world stage.

*

After diplomacy and foreign policy, I planned to focus on "*conflict and security*." This section practically wrote itself. The POTUS offhand suggestion that Canada should be considered for U.S. statehood had landed like an insult north of the border. Canada's response — tightening its alignment with the European Union, rethinking its reliance on U.S. military aircraft, and embracing defense priorities centered on climate security, gender equality, and sustained support for Ukraine — offered a perfect case study in how allies drift when values diverge.

*

By the middle of the semester, I would be focusing on "*International Law*." War. Trade. Human rights. Sovereignty. The legal frameworks that are supposed to restrain states — and what it means when those restraints are weakened. Students needed to understand not just the rules, but the *consequences* when those rules are bent or ignored.

*

International law would be followed by "*economic relations*." I'd show my students how U.S./Canada trade once functioned — stable, predictable, mutually beneficial — and then contrast the old relationship with the new one: a tariff-driven. I would explain

how economics can act as diplomacy, as leverage, and as pressure points.

*

As the semester draws to a close, I would focus on "*human rights*." Where to begin? Free speech alone could fill a semester, especially with the shifting interpretations emerging in the United States. But with my background in DEI and immigration, I wanted to focus on the widening gap between rhetoric and reality — particularly the treatment of non-violent immigrant detainees in harsh detention facilities, both domestic and offshore. The contrast between stated values and lived practices would force students to confront uncomfortable questions about national identity and moral responsibility.

*

The more I outlined, the clearer it became: this course wasn't just going to inform students — it was going to unsettle them, challenge them, wake them up. With Canada actively reducing its dependence on U.S. goods and services, every category offered a fresh angle, a new tension, a real-time case study.

The students are going to love this!

Chapter 69 – The Registrar

After determining my course layout, I presented a succinct course description to the registrar, who then posted it and proceeded to accept student enrollments for my class.

My course write-up simply said:

> *International Politics — An in-depth overview of how international politics is conducted, with particular emphasis on U.S. and Canada international relations.*

My description was simple, yet to the point.

*

Social media lit up just after I posted my course description. *"He's a transwoman professor,"* the student rumor mill started. Someone corrected this person. "*SHE'S a transwoman professor...*"

"*He's an American professor who protests in favor of DEI rights, and he's against immigrant detention.*"

"*SHE's an American professor...*"

"She's anti-establishment. She strongly dislikes the President of the United States."

"She can explain what is going on between the U.S. and Canada."

"She's the one who put out all of those protest videos."

"She's the one who has the mini-reality show..."

And so on.

As it turned out, social media generated a lot of excitement over my forthcoming course! I had the feeling that I'd struck a nerve. There was *a lot of interest* by the student body in understanding the cultural and economic differences between the U.S. and

Canada. This course struck a chord. It truly had the potential to become a real winner, one of the most popular classes on campus!

*

The week before classes began, the *Registrar's Office* was overloaded with student requests to take my course. The students, it seems, really wanted to better understand U.S./Canada relations under the POTUS regime. There was a real thirst for that kind of knowledge.

After turning away dozens of requests to join my class, the *Registrar's Office* contacted me and asked if I would accept more enrollees. I affirmed I would.

There were way more enrollees than they expected. They changed my classroom location to an area on the Saint John campus that can accommodate up to 300 people, located in and around the Cushman Dining Hall. It features lecture theatres used for conferences, weddings, and other gatherings.

I was, initially, supposed to have only 30 students in my class. But, because I had piqued the interest of the student body, I had 93 students sign up to take my class! And because the class was given in an open, cafeteria-like environment, sometimes I doubled that number with faculty and student drop-ins.

With a class that size, I was going to be real busy during my first semester at the College of New Brunswick.

Chapter 70 – Opening Day

Given the class size, it made sense to teach the course in lecture form. But the "lecture" format delivers information statically and does not encourage discussion. I wanted to encourage discussion, not block it.

I also wanted to find a way to make my classes relevant and interesting. I decided the way to do that was to use the *Socratic method*. This is a question-driven approach where the teacher engages students through probing questions that challenge assumptions and encourage more profound understanding.

The key to this method, I have found, is to ask a lot of open-ended questions. I planned to have my students reveal their assumptions about the current U.S./Canada difficulties, uncover hidden beliefs, and test the validity of their arguments by examining the foundation of those assumptions.

*

On Day 1, I started by probing students' expectations about the course.

"What do you hope to learn in this course?" I asked.

A student of Indian descent by the name of Rohan Sharma, who was sitting in the front row, said: *"I want to learn about the source of all the trouble we are currently having with America."*

"Perfect," I responded. "That you will."

The young woman sitting next to him said, *"I want to learn how we can fix our international problems*."

"Some of the many problems we will discuss can be easily fixed. But others, *cultural problems* are difficult to overcome. The U.S., for example, is an almost evenly divided country — half the people want one thing, the other half another. And when you're dealing with such multiplicity, it's a real conundrum. Some things are unsolvable in the short and long term. But not everything in politics can be fixed..."

"*I want to understand why the American people put the current POTUS in office*," came from the back of the room.

"That's a fascinating question. I think it's important to understand what is motivating American international behavior — and that starts with the voters. We'll discuss the election in the *conflict and security section* of this course."

"*I'd like a comparison of U.S. immigration policy versus our policy*," came from an older gentleman. I believe he is part of our faculty, maybe in the sciences department.

"You've come to the right place for that!"

"*I'd like to know why the U.S. keeps pulling out of climate agreements. Can you compare the U.S. goals and objectives to our goals and objectives?*"

"I'll cover that in the *environmental politics* section."

"*Will we be discussing human rights*?"

"Yes, we will be comparing Canada's approach to human rights versus the unconscionable human rights violations of the United States."

The class really liked my use of the word "unconscionable." They, like me, believe that the current U.S. administration is inexplicably and excessively ruthless and cruel.

I took several more requests and then began the lesson.

*

"First, I need to apologize," I started.

Some wise cracker interjected, "*What are you, Canadian?*" The class got a good laugh out of that one.

"Let me rephrase," came my retort. "I should have said, "First, I need to apologize, EH."

The class laughed. Everyone was smiling. I guess that I had established that I was an American, and they were Canadian.

"I need to apologize for springing a request on you at the last moment. With the permission of the class, I want to record each session. I'm writing a new book on U.S./Canada relations — and it would be enlightening for my readers to hear your thoughts and comments.

Some students objected to my request to video our sessions, but no one had a problem with my doing audio recordings.

"All of the points I make, along with your reactions and counterpoints, will make a great book!" I assured them. "And I will present each of you with a signed copy when it gets published."

With the offer of autographed copies to remember their participation in my course, objections melted away. I think they were excited that their thoughts and words might appear in a political science book.

*

I started, as I had planned, by explaining *International Relations Theory*. I had to talk about realism, liberalism, constructivism, and other critical theories that explain why states behave the way they do.

"Dry, but necessary," I warned my students.

"Understanding these theories," I told the class, "Sets the groundwork for understanding global governance, conflict and security, economic relations, and so on. So, here goes ..."

Chapter 71 – Teaching Poli-Sci Theory

"Let's start with realism," I said, as I started my first class. "At its core, *realism* argues that states act primarily out of power and national interest."

A few students already looked wary — realism can feel dry if you teach it straight from the textbook. But when you anchor it in real-world tensions, it comes alive.

"Think about any moment when a government prioritizes security, sovereignty, or national identity over cooperation. Realism helps explain those choices. It's the logic of power first, even when other values are at stake."

"We'll dig deeper into realism later," I promised, "but let's contrast it with another major theory. Who can tell me what *liberalism* emphasizes?"

A young man in a *Vote for Carney* T-shirt raised his hand. I nodded to him.

"Liberalism argues that cooperation is possible," he said. "Institutions matter. Economic interdependence reduces conflict."

"Exactly," I replied. "The key word is *cooperation*. Liberalism assumes states benefit when they work cooperatively with other countries — through trade, diplomacy, and shared rules."

I paused, letting the contrast settle.

"Now imagine a country where the political landscape is nearly evenly divided between people who prioritize cooperation and people who prioritize power and sovereignty. What does that create?"

A student in the front row answered, "America?"

The whole class cracked-up.

"You make a good point," I chuckled. "But the answer I was looking for was 'a split society — half leaning toward liberalism, half toward realism. These are two different, contrasting visions of how the world should work. Two different instincts about how a country should behave internationally. And when those visions are nearly evenly split, the result is...?"

"A real mess," another student comically stated. The class got a good chuckle out of that one, too.

"Exactly," I said with a smile. "It creates a democratic system trying to reconcile two fundamentally different worldviews."

*

We continued to discuss realism and liberalism for the rest of the class. But I chose not to dig into the deeper question of why different groups gravitate toward different theories — what drives motivations and mindsets. That would come later in the semester, when they had the tools to analyze identity, economics, and political psychology.

For now, they understood the essential divide: realism's power vs. liberalism's cooperation — and how that tension that shapes modern politics.

Chapter 72 – An After Class Comment

"Professor," a young coed approached me, "I'm curious to know if you understand why we Canadians got so irate at the suggestion that Canada become the 51st state of the United States?"

The genesis of this question was that the president of the United States had lit a powder keg under the Canadian people when he suggested that Canada could be annexed as the fifty-first state of the United States. She was asking if I knew why Canadians were so pissed off about that.

"I have assumed that the reason for Canada's anger was due to Canadian pride and nationalism. You are a different culture; you have a different form of government. And you don't want to change that to become Americans. Am I correct?"

"Sort of. There's also something about our history that makes us never want to be Americans." I later came to like this student very much. She was wise beyond her years. We had other after class discussions during the course of the semester, and I came to learn that she hailed from St. Andrews by-the-Sea — right at the mouth of the St. Croix River.

"Professor, have you ever heard of the Penobscot Loyalists?" she asked.

"I haven't," I admitted. "Well, there's proof I don't know everything," I said. "But I'll look into it tonight, and we can talk about them some more after the next class."

"Let's do," she assented. "I think you're going to be surprised...

*

POTUS's idiotic statement suggesting that Canada become the 51st U.S. state helped cause a complete shutdown of Canadian travel to the United States, resulting in lost revenue from vacations and business travel. And it resulted in U.S.-based stores in Canada being boycotted. And American whiskies and bourbon were removed from liquor store shelves. POTUS's Canada policy has turned a once-friendly nation into a less friendly nation.

*

That evening, I followed up on my promise. I dug into the history of the Penobscot Loyalists — and what I found reframed the entire conversation about Canadian identity.

They were among the thousands of Loyalists who fled or were expelled from the newly formed United States after the American Revolution. Some went south to Spanish Florida. Others scattered to British-held islands in the Caribbean. But a large number — including the Penobscot group — crossed into what was then *British North America*, the territory that would later become Canada.

I understood my student's point immediately. The history and heritage of the people of New Brunswick can be traced to a displaced people — a displaced people driven from their homes by United States "patriots." These were the very people whose descendants now live in the region the President had recently suggested annexing.

I continued reading.

The British government, determined to support its displaced subjects, provided substantial aid — millions of pounds in compensation, along with land grants. In what is now New Brunswick and Nova Scotia:

- Heads of households received 500 acres to clear and farm.
- Single men received 300 acres.
- Townships were granted 2,000 acres for schools and churches.
- Tools — axes, spades, hoes, plows, grindstones, saws — were distributed to help them rebuild.

St. Andrews, a beautiful city in New Brunswick located on Passamaquoddy Bay, itself was founded in 1783, the year the *Treaty of Paris* ended the war. After the Revolution, roughly 60,000 Loyalists became refugees; about 15,000 settled in the

region that would later split into Nova Scotia and New Brunswick.

The Penobscot Loyalists had supported the building of a British fort at Castine, Maine — later the site of a major American naval defeat. They arrived in Canada not empty-handed but determined: they dismantled their homes in Castine, loaded the lumber onto barges, and floated their houses north across Passamaquoddy Bay to rebuild them plank by plank.
Their story wasn't just about relocation. It was about identity — about choosing, or being forced into, a different political community.

As I pondered what I had read, the student's point became clear. For communities shaped by Loyalist history, the idea of being absorbed into the United States isn't just a policy debate. It touches a collective memory of displacement, of choosing a different political path, of building a society with its own institutions, values, and sense of sovereignty.

Suggesting that Canada should become part of the United States — even hypothetically — brushes roughly against that history.

And if you're looking for a way to stir national sentiment, invoking unfond historical memories will do it.

Chapter 73 – The Remainder of the Semester

I felt that I had established the perfect atmosphere for my course. I was teaching theory, but with real world examples — and with a particular U.S./Canada comparative politics flavor.

When the second class rolled around, we still had a lot of material to discuss regarding international politics. But I needed to start the class with something provocative. So, I opened with, "Let's talk about what's really happening between the United States and Canada."

It was as though someone flipped a light switch. I suddenly had everyone's attention. There was clearly strong interest in this subject.

"What do you all think? What is the reason, or what are the reasons, for the current U.S./Canada rift? For years, the United States and Canada have had solid ties and a good international relationship. And now these close relations have fallen by the wayside. What has happened?"

The opinions came flying in:

> *"The U.S. has declared economic warfare, and we're aggressively responding to that warfare, looking for other trading partners."*
>
> *"You pissed us off — we will never be your 51st state."*

I had to stop the conversation for a moment.

"I just want the class to consider me as an impartial teacher. So, no saying stuff like *'You Americans did this, or you, referring to me, are responsible for this. I'm with the 48.3 percent of Americans who lost out during the last election. I didn't vote for POTUS. So please don't shoot the messenger.*"

Nods of assent came from the class. I restarted. "Okay, let's continue."

*

"The U.S. has threatened our security by suggesting that we be removed from the Five Eyes intelligence alliance."

That was a good one. I didn't even know about U.S. threat to withdraw from that alliance. That would mean that the U.S. wouldn't be sharing the intelligence data that we gathered with Canada, nor they with us. Think of the impact that might have on counter-intelligence sharing of terrorist threats in North America...

*

Through the remainder of the semester, we kept the class atmosphere interesting and lively.

"*The U.S. tariff policy is costing us domestic jobs.*"

"*The U.S. is blaming us for its fentanyl problems.*"

A young lady to my left stated, "*The U.S. is trying to drive our international policies. So, for instance, because we support the existence of a Palestinian state, the U.S. is applying tariff pressure because your POTUS — let me correct that — their POTUS doesn't like Canada's international position.*"

"This young lady is a hundred percent correct," I agreed. "POTUS is basically saying, 'Your nation is doing what we don't want it to, so we're going to punish you.' It's a bully move; it's about asserting dominance."

I let my students keep venting as I taught them political science theory as related to international dynamics... And all of my classes, for the remainder of the semester, continued with such lively and timely discussions.

Chapter 74 – Fourfold

November rolled around, and it was time to cover the *economic relations* section of my course. One of the students seated in the front row asked for my opinion what has caused the rift between the U.S. and Canada. I tried my best to deliver the answer dispassionately.

*

"The way I see this rift is fourfold," I said, pacing slowly across the front of the room. "It's driven by differences in *trade policy*, *strategic power dynamics*, *cultural and political orientations*, and *evolving intelligence and defense relationships*."

I held up a finger.

"First: *tariffs and trade policy*."

"Recent U.S. tariffs on Canadian steel and aluminum have been interpreted by many in Canada as politically charged or economically punitive. These measures disrupted long-standing trade patterns and prompted Canadian counter-tariffs. But instead of escalating into a prolonged trade war, Canada has increasingly focused on diversifying its economic partnerships — expanding trade with Europe, Asia, and other regions. That shift alone is a major development in North American economic relations."

A second finger.

"Second: *power dynamics*."

"Trade tools aren't only economic instruments; they can also function as leverage. When one state uses tariffs or other unilateral measures to pressure another, it can resemble what scholars sometimes call gamesmanship — tactics that push the boundaries of fair play without technically violating formal rules. The example one of you raised earlier, involving diplomatic pressure over Canada's position on a Middle Eastern issue, fits this pattern. It illustrates how states sometimes use economic or political tools to influence the behavior of partners."

A third finger.
"Third: *cultural and political friction*."

"The United States and Canada share deep ties, but they also have distinct political cultures. Canada's policy landscape places stronger emphasis on social welfare programs and environmental regulation, while U.S. policy debates often reflect different priorities and ideological traditions. For example, recent U.S. shifts away from certain renewable-energy initiatives contrast with Canada's continued investment in climate-related policies. These differences don't make cooperation impossible, but they do create friction when national priorities diverge."

And finally, a fourth.

"Fourth: *intelligence and defense considerations*."

Intelligence sharing has long been a cornerstone of U.S./Canada cooperation, especially through alliances like the Five Eyes partnership. But when intelligence becomes entangled with political disputes, it can create uncertainty and strain. In response to these dynamics, Canada has been strengthening its relationships with European partners and exploring broader defense cooperation frameworks. The goal is not to sever ties with the United States, but to reinforce its own strategic autonomy and reduce over-reliance on any single partner."

I let my hand fall to my side.

"Taken together, these four areas — trade, power, political culture, and security — help explain why the U.S./Canada relationship is experiencing tension. But they also show how international politics is never one-dimensional. It's a mix of interests, identities, institutions, and strategic choices."

*

The students were still leaning forward, engaged. I took that as a good sign. They were learning important lessons about how they are governed and what motivates governments.

Chapter 75 – Environmental Politics

Environmental protections are important to me. And so, when it came time for the environmental politics class, I really shone. There was so much research that needed to be discussed that we spent two days examining the differences in the Canadian environmental stance and that of America.

"The most important thing to understand about Canadian environmental politics is that Canada is committed to net-zero emissions by 2050. To do this, Canada has a strong federal carbon pricing system – exceed your allotted carbon emission and you'll be fined. Canada is also investing in clean energy grids – solar and wind power-driven grids," I said as I opened the class. I asked my students what they know about the clean energy grids. Not only did they know about wind and solar power, but they also knew where all of the wind and solar projects were in New Brunswick. Impressive.

"Now let's look at the United States. Believe it or not, the United States has several agencies that are chartered with taking responsibility to reduce carbon emissions. The *Department of Energy's Office of Fossil Energy and Carbon Management* is in charge of a major federal effort to support *carbon management* technologies — technologies that help capture carbon emissions, remove CO_2 from the atmosphere, transport captured carbon to safe storage, and convert some of that carbon into useful products."

"And the U.S. has a *Carbon Reduction Program* managed by the *Federal Highway Administration* that focuses on reducing transportation-related CO_2 emissions."

"But here's the thing. POTUS and his administration don't believe in global warming, don't believe in "*climate change*," so they do everything they can to interfere with climate protection programs. That means underfunding U.S. agencies chartered with climate protection — and withdrawing from the *Paris Climate Accord*'s world stage. And several *Environmental Protection Agency* rules and regulations have been discontinued.

And, the fact that the oil industry is such a huge contributor to the campaign funds of the POTUS politicians may also be playing a role in the government's anti-climate change position.

*

I felt that this class was getting to "lecture-y," so I changed the my approach.

"Can some of you," I asked, "Use your AI engines to locate some of the quotes this POTUS has offered with respect to climate change?"

Almost every mobile phone in the room was busied. And within a minute, the first quotes started rolling in.

A senior-class Poli-sci major, a senior, was one of the first to answer. She quoted some of POTUS's early tweets from back in the days of "*Twitter*."

The class roared when she read the first one: "The concept of global warming was created by and for the Chinese in order to make U.S. manufacturing non-competitive." That was from a Tweet in November of 2012.

She followed with her next quote: "This very expensive GLOBAL WARMING bullshit has got to stop. Our planet is freezing, record low temps, and our GW scientists are stuck in ice." That was a Tweet back in January 2014.

I asked the class if anyone was willing to give me a counter opinion regarding POTUS's assertion that global warming was bullshit. I had no takers...

The Poli-sci Senior read her last quote. "Snowing in Texas and Louisiana, record setting freezing temperatures throughout the country and beyond. Global warming is an expensive hoax!" from a Tweet in December of 2013.

"Apparently," I stated, "Snow in unusual places is an indicator that climate change is not happening. I would argue that snow in unusual places is a climate change — hence it is real..."

*

"Has POTUS changed his mind since then?" I asked. The room echoed "No!"

Another Poli-sci senior at the back of the room raised his hand. He had another POTUS quote, and it was hysterical. *"I'm an environmentalist. A lot of people don't understand that.* I think I know more about the environment than most people." That one was issued in 2019.

The class cracked up. The arrogance!

One last one, coming from a sophomore in the second row. "Climate change is a big scam for a lot of people to make a lot of money." This was from a PBS interview.

"Interesting," I responded. "And who is making money with the POTUS' refusal to enter climate change accords and to spend money on clean energy?"

"Oil and coal companies!" came the answer in unison.

*

I decided to keep on this AI track. "Remember, this is an international politics course, so let's view what's going on through a political lens. Let's do the same exercise. Hit your AI assistant, and see what you find regarding the political ramifications of the POTUS treatment of the oil companies."

The answers came flying back.

The Poli-sci major who had first responded to the POTUS quote exercise was the first to raise her hand.

"Go for it," I said.

"Oil companies have profited from Donald Trump's policies in several key ways, especially through deregulation, expanded access to federal lands, and favorable tax incentives. However, the picture is more nuanced than a simple windfall."
"Nice find," I said. "So, from a political point of view, oil and

coal companies, principal POTUS backers, are getting deregulation, federal lands, and tax incentives. Regulations in the oil industry are in place to protect the environment. POTUS, being such a knowledgeable environmentalist, suddenly doesn't care about safety and environmental regulation to protect the health and well-being of people located near drilling or refining operations. And he even declared a national energy emergency to expedite permitting for pipelines and LNG terminals."

Many in the class were shaking their heads "No" in disbelief. A few muttered, "unbelievable."

"Sure, why not sell off access to federal lands. That way we can get access to more oil and gas — and further pollute the environment," I said sarcastically.

Again, the class was shaking their heads "No."

"And they get favorable tax breaks, so they have to pay lower taxes when the U.S. economy is in peril. Brilliant."

"Professor," one of the students toward the back of the auditorium raised his hand. "I think I've found something interesting."

"Do tell," I replied.

The student read from his phone: "Companies like Occidental Petroleum benefited from increased payouts—up to $180 per ton of CO_2 — for injecting carbon into wells to extract more crude." The student paused as he scrolled his screen.

"And this says that his mega bill, probably that *Big Beautiful Bill* that was passed on the 4th of July, has slashed the royalties oil companies pay for drilling on federal lands, boosting profit margins."

"So POTUS has made it less expensive to drill on federally-owned property. There's a surprise," I shook my head no. "But let's go back to 'uneven' access. What that means is that

POTUS has some 'favorites' in the oil industry that he listens to. Probably big donors. These guys are able to bend his ear to influence energy policy, leaving others out. At the same time, others are left out, despite being part of the same industry. This creates a kind of insider favoritism that is probably driving others in the industry crazy, because these guys are the preferred ones shaping energy policy to their benefit."

Chapter 76 – Human Rights

During the human rights class segment, I relayed a personal story to my students.

"This is a topic that is near and dear to my heart," I started that class. "This past year, a friend of mine, an immigrant and the father of one of my students, died while in captivity in the CECOT prison in El Salvador. Manny was a produce business owner, a hard worker, loved by everyone in the community – but ICE snatched him and sent him to a prison known for torture and abuse in another country. It is to Manny that I dedicate this session."

The class bowed their heads, many looking at me in disbelief.

"So today we're going to talk about human rights and justice. We're going to talk about norms — international norms for how human beings should be treated. We're going to talk about humanitarian groups and efforts to ensure that all humans are treated with dignity. And we're going to talk about global inequalities with respect to human rights. We will also talk about the implications of free speech, and how governments sustain it or prevent it."

*

"Over the years, I've travelled all over the world for conferences and vacations. I've been all over China, I spent a year in the Middle East, I've been to Russia, Mexico, Thailand, South Africa, South America, India, all over Europe, and all over the United States. In fact, it's probably easier to tell you where I haven't been: Australia and New Zealand."

"And one of the things I look to understand in every country that I visit is their policy on free speech. It tells you a lot about the government and its people."

"In China, you watch what you say if you're a citizen. Same in the Middle East. Same in Russia. Because if you say the wrong thing, you can be detained or arrested.

"As for comparing the U.S. version of free speech with the Canadian version, the key differences are that the American First Amendment to the Constitution offers near-absolute protection. All kinds of speech — be it political, religious, or even hate speech — are protected under the law. In Canada, there's a balancing act between individual rights and potential harm to society. So, freedom of speech in Canada is subject to certain limits and restrictions."

The class and I discussed the free speech restrictions in Canada. The class felt that Canada's position, placing limits on free speech, was a better solution than allowing all kinds of speech, particularly hate speech, to proliferate. I, of course, felt the opposite.

Chapter 77 – Clicked

Alex and I just "clicked" as a couple. We had similar interests, which led to a more profound friendship. We both loved the intimacy. We were there for each other as companions, but we gave each other the space that we needed. We cared for each other.

He did indeed work a lot, while I, starting a new teaching gig, needed a lot of time to structure my coursework. Our lives became wake-up, work on separate projects, eat, screw, and sleep. I kind of liked that lifestyle...

Alex was doing some investigative journalism in Augusta, so he was gone most of the second week of our cohabitation. He was trying to find out which MAGA state senator had turned Manny into ICE. He planned to "crucify" her when he learned who she was.

I, on the other hand, had set up my office in the spare bedroom so that I could build my course, research on the Internet, and look for protest opportunities. As an added bonus, I asked to care for Mlpita in Alex's absence; Alex agreed, and I now had a new play buddy. I came across a YouTube video about "*schnoodles*," a mix between a schnauzer and a poodle, which is the type of dog Mlpita is. The video mentioned that "schnoodles require at least an hour of exercise a day." Try five hours... We constantly walk, play ball, and play roughhouse with toys. And I talked to him a lot about all sorts of things. I love this dog...

*

I first noticed her on one of our schnoodle evening walks. I had seen her bright red Mustang parked at the end of the block earlier in the day — and there she was again.

As Mlpita and I walked by her car, I noticed that her window was down — and she just glared at me. I said, "Good Evening," but the greeting was not returned. She just glared and studied me carefully.

There she was again the next morning. Parked on the other side of the street but positioned such that she could see Alex's house in her rear-view and side mirrors. She clearly saw Mlpita and I depart our home for a morning walk, and this time she started her car and drove off.

Happenstance or purposefully, I wondered.

That afternoon, I happened to glance out the window, and there she was, driving by slowly. Was she a neighbor – did she live in this neighborhood? Was she a thief, sizing up houses for later thefts? Or, *was she spying on me*? *And if so, why?*

I, relieved, did not see her during Mlpita's evening walk. I was thankful for that. But at around 10:00 p.m., when I was preparing to go to sleep, Mlpita went down to the kitchen, I presumed to get something to eat or drink, and he started barking madly at the back slider. I rushed downstairs to see what had set him off — he was at that juncture growling and looking out the slider window. I called Alex.

*

"Alex," I asked, "Does one of your female neighbors have a bright red Mustang?"

Alex went stone-cold quiet.

"Are you there?" I asked.

"Um, yes, I am," he replied, immediately realizing what was happening and trying to figure out what to do about it. His answer was slow to emerge. Finally, he said, "No, none of my neighbors owns a bright red Mustang."

I was concerned. "Then why is a lady driving a bright Red Mustang surveilling our house?" I was thinking at that point that perhaps Olivia had put her up to it.

Alex knew exactly what was going on. "Mary, I'd like for you and the dog to come to Augusta to be with me. Immediately!"

"Huh? Why?"

"Did you get a good look at the lady in question?"

"Black hair, dark brown eyes, wears glasses, but I couldn't really see her body, so I don't know her build or height. All I know is that when I said *Good Evening* to her last night, she just scowled."

I paused. I sensed that something was wrong.

"She's back," Alex announced after a few moments. "I'm speculating that she's back."

"Who's back?" I asked.

"Marnie."

"Who?"

Alex paused. "Marnie Streeter. She's been gone for a while, I know not where, but now she's back."

"You're creeping me out, Alex. Who is she?"

"A former," Alex paused, searching for the right word, "Girlfriend."

I suddenly got the picture. She was a stalker! And she was stalking Alex — but Alex was not here, so she was now stalking me.

"I'm on my way," I said hurriedly, and terminated the call.

*

I quickly packed my bags, put my laptop in a backpack, grabbed Mlpita, locked the house, and made a quick escape to Augusta. *What have I gotten myself into*? I asked myself as I hopped on I-95 south.

Chapter 78 — The Rat in the State House

Alex was getting a pretty close to finding out who ratted Manny out. Maine, in 2025, has 15 women in the Senate and 60 in the House of Representatives.

"Women make up over 40% of Maine's legislative body," Alex told Warren Lebold, his managing editor. But of that number, only 15 are Republican. So that narrows my search for the rat down considerably."

"But the real question," Warren replied, "Is not how many women politicians there are in the House and Senate. "The real question is: 'How many are MAGA Republicans — the kind who are blindly loyal to POTUS and would serve to ingratiate themselves with that slimeball leader?'"

Alex did some digging. The answer: one State Senator, and four Representatives.

Those are my targets, Alex decided. *Now, how am I going to determine which one pointed the finger at Manny?*

Chapter 79 – Stephanie and I

I miss Mary...

By the same token, I love being with Stephanie. It's an entirely different experience living with a trans woman as opposed to a heterosexual woman. We relate to each other on another plane – we have our sexuality in common; we have the same medical, social and legal issues. We struggle to protect our identities; we are ever-vigilant about safety. We understand each other in ways that hetero women do not and cannot.

A lot of us struggle with dysphoria – the opposite of euphoria. We experience a state of emotional discomfort because of our "predicament." Emotionally, we often feel uneasy, sad, irritable, or just plain restless. And knowing that your transwomen friends feel the same way you do creates a kind of bond.

There is also humor to lift our spirits. We laugh at ourselves. We get silly and giddy. We have our own language; we have our own culture.

In Bangor, I had many choices when it came to LGBTQ+-friendly bars. *11 Central* is fun, as are *The Tavern, The New Waverly, The Penobscot Pour House, The Stage Door,* and *Happy Endings*. And, for dancing, there's always the *Half Acre Nightclub*. But none of these are really trans or LGBTQ+-focused. They're more like LGBTQ tolerant.

In St. John, Stephanie and I go out to dinner a lot. We visit *Italian by Night* for rustic Italian cuisine in a cozy atmosphere. It also has a curated wine list. *The East Coast Bistro* offers "French-inspired" Canadian food, including duck breast, halibut, and seasonal maritime fare. *Decimal 81* offers contemporary Canadian dishes. And for something different, the *Water Street Dinner Theater* offers dinner with live entertainment. But there are also bars and restaurants that seem to cater specifically to the LGBTQ+ community.

In St. John, my favorite LGBTQ+ bar is the "*R Bar*." Though not specifically LGBTQ+, it caters to a lot of us. It fits in the category of "dive bar," characterized by being tacky, old, seedy, and unpretentious. Besides the "tackiness," the thing I like most about the R Bar is their karaoke nights. I kinda knew it, but, according to others, it turns out that I'm a pretty good singer. I enjoy singing songs by Sinatra, Bobby Darin, and Tom Petty. I do that so regularly that I have even developed a little following.

My second favorite location for socializing in St. John is the *Union Station Lounge*. It's your typical English-style pub, and I find that setting comfortable, especially in the winter. Stephanie and I have a few friends who like to hang out there because it is casual and laid back. And, of course, I like their karaoke nights, too...

*

Living with Stephanie is interesting. Yes, we can have heady conversations, just like I used to have regularly with Mary. But there is something about her outlook toward me — she gets me. She knows when I'm circling down in the dumps, and she knows why I feel that way. She lifts me up.

I'm a way better cook than Stephanie.

We teach at the same school, so, of course, we gossip about our fellow teachers.

Stephanie is not a slob. She is as meticulous as I am.

I don't know why, probably because we are so alike, I feel absolute joy when I'm with Stephanie.

*

We have had a total of one argument in the five months I've lived with Stephanie. One evening, I was interested in the same guy that she was, so we both stood a shot at "it." Turned out, he chose someone else altogether.

Chapter 80 – My Book

With classes completed and Christmas approaching, I put the closing touches on the book that I had been working on all semester.

The approach I used was essentially to take my class content and class notes to construct a book that discusses American voting behavior and how it is straining U.S./Canada relations.

I kept the working title, *International Politics: The POTUS War with Canada*. And, in the book, I focused on how Canada is responding to U.S. tariff pressure on Canadian steel, aluminum, and automobiles with a mix of strategic countermeasures, diplomatic efforts, and economic recalibration.

In short, Canada has responded with reciprocal tariffs. It uses the Canada-U.S.-Mexico Agreement (CUSMA) to limit U.S. imports, and it's finding new trade partners. I also observed that, despite the U.S. pressure, Canada remains heavily dependent on U.S. trade—especially in sectors like crude oil, beef, and automotive manufacturing.

I completed my first draft during the second week of December. The editors reviewed what I had written and generally liked the book. And they especially liked the myriad of student anecdotes that I had worked into my prose — made possible by the class recordings that I had done. The one comment I received most was "*Why didn't you propose ways to fix this U.S.-Canada dispute*?"

I didn't because the damage done by the current administration has been irreparable. Canada is finding new markets for its goods – and new, more reliable partners. The country is looking to establish trade and defense partnerships with other countries.

The cat has gotten out of the bag, and is not coming back...

Chapter 81 – The Fundraiser

The last day of classes of the Fall semester was Friday, December 6th.

I thought my course had been a huge success, mostly because during every class I had picked a current hot topic near and dear to the students' hearts. My students were *always* highly engaged. I framed the whole course around the hot topic of U.S./Canada relations, incorporating all the basics of political theory, practice, types of government, and societal approaches like human rights.

*

On the final day of exams, I got a request to visit the Provost and Vice-President Academic. She has a lot to do with various elements of the St. John curriculum. Was the College going to offer me employment for the Spring semester — or was I in trouble? Again?

*

To my surprise and relief, the Provost had called me in to congratulate me on the reception that my poli-sci course had received.

"We'd like for you to teach it again in the Spring Semester, if that is to your liking."

"Of course," I responded. "I'd be happy to."

"But, if I may, I have one additional request. It comes from the *Scholarships & Bursaries* department. We were wondering if you could speak at one of their fundraisers?"

I was honored. I responded, "Of course. I'd be happy to. On what topic?"

"We, at the College, and many of our alumni, would love to hear your raw thoughts on the recent behavior of the U.S. government. That is, if it's not too personal."

"I'd love to share. When, where, and how long?"

"Just before Christmas; at *TD Station*; and for about an hour."

TD Station is the local hockey stadium, home to the St. John Seadogs. It seats between 6,300 and 6,600 people. She was clearly planning a big event, I thought.

"This will be fun," I smiled in approval.

"We should get about 500 people, so the stadium won't be full. But stadium management gives us access for free, so the price is right. The audience will be St. John residents, and it's usually attended by a large contingent of alumni."

"Perfect," I said. "We can all have a very lively political discussion. I'm looking forward to it."

For the next 20 minutes we planned the speech topics and locked in the venue and date. I would have about two weeks to prepare. *This will be exciting,* I thought. I looked very much forward to it.

Chapter 82 – My Speech Synopsis

I chose to speak in a personal, from-the-heart, extemporaneous manner. My plan was to ad-lib and deliver my speech in a very personal manner.

*

The following is a synopsis of my speech.

My DEI rights and protections were withdrawn via several Executive Orders from POTUS. POTUS withdrew my *Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion* protections. And along with that, various other civil rights protections. Then he made me a non-person. There are only two types of persons – male or female – based on genitalia. Apparently, I don't exist...

And then, POTUS using other "*emergency*" Executive Orders, to attack my friend, Manny, an immigrant who was contributing to our society. He was not a criminal, but was captured and sent to prison, resulting in his death in a modern-day concentration camp.

I would tell my audience that POTUS sent my friend and a quarter million others to prison, simply for being in the U.S. illegally. Yes, deport people who are here illegally, I'm okay with that. But do it humanely. Don't deny them habeas corpus rights and put them in jail for indefinite periods of time.

Nine out of ten of the immigrants who have been arrested are not criminals. They have not committed physical crimes against other people in this country; they don't deserve this. This practice is not only illegal, but also disgraceful. And, it's un-American. Our country is now on the world stage as a *major violator of human rights*.

Furthermore, what happened to Manny's body is greatly disturbing. He was cremated, then unceremoniously dumped in a mass grave site. What is transpiring is truly horrifying. We are reliving the Holocaust, the murder of millions of Jews, only this time we're imprisoning millions of immigrants. Like the Jews were to Hitler, the immigrants are to POTUS.

With the way we are handling deportation, we've reached a new low on the world stage of global responsibility, ethical treatment, and humanitarian leadership. What we are doing to Immigrants is morally reprehensible and ethically indefensible! It has to STOP!

Foreigners are no longer welcome in our country; nor are we in theirs...

POTUS and his tariffs have tubed our economy. With the previous administration, we were well on our way out of recession. We have now entered a full-blown inflationary period. Congratulations... We are now paying HIGHER prices for goods and services. POTUS supporters take notice – you've been DUPED.

Then came the *Big Beautiful Bill*... The spineless bastards in Congress and the Senate increased our debt by trillions of dollars while further widening the gap between the very rich and the rest of us.

POTUS and the Republican Party, through their bizarre tariff plans, ruined our economy. And Americans have become pariahs in the rest of the world. Congratulations!

With POTUS's "*Big Beautiful Bill*," he orchestrated what I consider to be a cardinal sin as it applies to the U.S. deficit. He increased it by trillions of dollars. Somehow, borrowing money from other nations in order to imprison our immigrants and enrich the rich makes sense to him. So, let's mortgage the financial future of the next generation to violate the civil and human rights of immigrants. How does this make America great again?

Then, the flow of accurate information from the government to the people was cut off. Disapprove of the jobs data? Fire the Commissioner of the *Bureau of Labor Statistics* and appoint someone who will certify job data approved by the President. Any other data that you don't like, do the same.

American businesspeople and economists aren't stupid. They will, innovatively, find new ways to determine the actual job increases or decreases. Let the truth set you free!

Yet another setback. This current government has cut technology and medical research programs. Apparently, the government is unaware that every dollar invested in research is estimated to generate over two dollars in economic activity through job creation, patents, and commercialization. Not only are we taking a financial hit by no longer investing in vaccines, clean energy, and digital infrastructure, but we are also losing our best research talents to other countries. It will take decades to recover from this giant step backward.

The government is attempting to introduce the Christian religion as the foundation of our "*American Values*." If you're not a Christian – if you are Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, or if you are non-religious — get ready to have Christianity jammed down your throat.

What am I most concerned about? The formation of a secret police organization, and the use of the U.S. military against our own citizens. Think back to WWII. The Geheime Staatspolizei, often referred to as the Gestapo, means "Secret State Police." The Gestapo is known for its cruelty toward all dissenters, collaborators, and innocent people. In the U.S.S.R., the Narodnyy Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del, or "People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs," operated the Gulag system of forced labor camps and carried out ethnic cleansing and political repression across Soviet territories. ICE has the potential to be expanded...

Add the military takeover of American cities to the list. The practice run was in Los Angeles. But why stop there? Why not, for bogus reasons, take over the Capitol of our nation? And create a list of sanctuary cities. Then deploy our military to take them over.

And then there was the Epstein situation. Epstein and an assault on young women. Did POTUS join him? Will we ever know?

Friendships with dictators. "Sure, Mr. War Crimes, come visit me in Alaska."

"Sure, Mr. Prime Minister, I'll give you all the munitions you need to bomb and starve civilians in Gaza."

And, I want you to go after this long list of people. Vengeance is mine!

*

I wrapped up my speech with a standard offer made on late-night commercials from kitchen appliance salesmen: *But wait – there's more...*

Will there be a revolt? I worry about that too. The *Big Beautiful Bill* cuts the taxes of the top 10% of earners, includes provisions that favor high-income households and businesses, thus reinforcing *wealth accumulation* at the top. And it cuts regulation, to the benefit of wealthy stakeholders.

Meanwhile, it cuts Medicaid for ten to fifteen million people. And over 2.4 million people will lose access to food assistance. And Student Aid and ACA subsidies are being capped. Additionally, the Affordable Care Act, also known as "Obamacare," is seeing its subsidies trimmed. This is disproportionately affecting low-income families.

What is the ultimate goal? Is it closing the gap between the rich and the poor, or creating a bigger gap that benefits the people at the top?

Suppose the goals are to enrich the people at the top, halt social mobility, force households to live paycheck to paycheck, and increase the cost of sustenance and goods. In that case, this administration has been wildly successful.

If the gap continues to rise between the rich and the poor, then a situation like the one preceding the French Revolution could develop. "*Let them eat cake...*"

*

For the most part, my speech was very well received. That is, until I talked with a Catholic priest who had been seated at my table for the after-event banquet. I didn't much like his criticism, but, in retrospect, I found his suggestion for improvement to be good advice. I would follow that advice, and it would change my future trajectory in politics and in entertainment.

Chapter 83 – The Empathy Wall

One positive thing that happened in 2025 is that I think I broke through "*The Empathy Wall*."

The *Empathy Wall*, according to Arlie Russell Hochschild in her book "*Strangers in Their Own Land*," is a barrier we all must cross in order to resolve our political differences. After reading the case studies in her book, and after conducting numerous additional interviews in some of Maine's poorest counties, I developed a deeper understanding of the *Make-America-Great-Again* political movement. And, as it turns out, we have several views in common.

- We all want our government to be run more efficiently. We want waste eliminated. We aim to eliminate functional duplication and redundancy. We want agencies and departments reassessed for the value that they provide.
- We want ridiculous regulations removed. Is it really a federal crime to label a product "Ham Turkey" or use different fonts for "Ham" and "Turkey" on packaging? Selling spaghetti thicker than 0.11 inches is illegal under federal law. Anything thicker isn't "spaghetti"—it's a crime. You can't sell wine with a brand name that includes the word *"zombie*." Apparently, undead branding is off-limits. "Salad Dressing" must be called "Salad Dressing." If it's not labeled exactly that way, it's a federal violation. And the list goes on… Stop it!

  Having said this, I'm a firm believer in the *Environmental Protection Agency*. Big business will do what is most profitable, and that can include damaging the environment to drive profit. It is important to me that the EPA continue to do its job.
- I agree with protecting family values, creating safe communities, and creating opportunities for personal success. I want everybody to be able to succeed. I'd even argue for free advanced education for all.
- I agree with both the Democrats and Republicans who

support aid to Ukraine. As world citizens, we must stop aggression when and where it happens.

- I, too, want bipartisanship returned to government. My feeling is that, under Obama, we saw a fundamental shift toward *my-way-or-the-highway government*. Binary rulership with the party in power running rampant over the ideas and needs of the other party. This form of political censorship of ideas must stop.

I now have a better understanding of conservative views and values. And I now empathize with some of their views.

Chapter 84 – Considering Other Governments

With the U.S. government in "broken" condition, I found myself wondering how other countries are dealing with the needs of the poor.

I considered Norway, and the way it provides universal healthcare, free education, strong labor protections — all resulting in a high standard of living. Norway is a democratic socialist country with a mixed economy.

To me, Sweden was practically the same as Norway. Sweden has an emphasis on state-provided welfare, progressive taxation, and innovation-friendly policies. It's a combination of capitalism with strong social programs.

I considered another democratic socialist country: Finland. Finland achieves top global rankings in education, happiness, and equality. Wouldn't it be great if the U.S. could accomplish the same thing?

Isn't that interesting — three of the most equitable, happiest countries in the world are Scandinavian. What would it take to make our country a "happy" rather than a divided country?

*

As long as I was considering how governments best serve their people, or "handle" them, I thought about Cuba, Vietnam and China.

Even our neighbor Cuba offers universal healthcare, public health outcomes, and broad access to education.

Is there a lesson to be learned from Vietnam — a country we tried to defeat in order to stop the spread of communism? Vietnam has experienced a period of rapid economic growth and poverty reduction through a strong state role in driving the country's economic development.

And finally, I considered China. China has lifted hundreds of millions of people out of poverty. We need to do that here in the

United States. China, however, is under one-party, authoritarian rule, which I don't like at all. Still, is there a lesson to be learned about how China has worked an economic miracle in recent years? Maybe they've got a government that functions better than ours...

Chapter 85 – If Mary Were Here…

I still haven't talked to Mary. And I miss her. Tremendously.

I imagine that if Mary were to provide a historical perspective on the current state of the country, she would say: "We've been here before, and we'll find our way out."

Then she would start citing examples of previous presidents and their administrations that behaved like our current POTUS and his administration.

A year ago, she taught a history class that compared POTUS to several other presidents. She talked about corruption and pointed her students to President Warren G. Harding and the *Teapot Dome Scandal*.

She talked about President Andrew Jackson and his "to the victor goes the spoils" administration of sycophants. I don't think she spoke about how President Jackson forced Indigenous People into confined encampments called "*reservations*." The *Indian Removal Act of 1830* led to the tragic episode known as the *Trail of Tears*, a forced march where many Indigenous People died of exposure, disease, and starvation. Historians estimate that between 13,000 and 17,000 Indigenous people died as a direct result of the forced removals. *How many immigrants are going to die because of their forced removal*?

Jackson was also known for his fiery temperament and his anti-establishment rhetoric. Does this guy sound vaguely familiar?

She talked about FDR and his internment of Japanese Americans during World War II.

She talked about Ulysses S. Grant and his Indian assimilation program. *Let's make Indians act and behave just like us…*

She talked about Richard Nixon and the Watergate Scandal.

She talked about George W. Bush and his outright lie to the American people that Saddam Hussein had nuclear weapons. The war that ensued, under false pretenses, and cost American lives.

*

In that course, I don't think she discussed how bizarre the Supreme Court can be at times.

Probably the most egregious miscarriage of justice was the *Dred Scott v. Sandford* decision of 1857. The one that declared African Americans could not be U.S. citizens. It also invalidated the *Missouri Compromise* and helped entrench slavery. Appalling.

In 1896, the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision upheld racial segregation under the "*separate but equal*" doctrine. It also legitimized Jim Crow laws.

The *Korematsu v. United States* decision of 1944 upheld the internment of Japanese Americans during WWII.

In 1927, the *Buck v. Bell* decision allowed the forced sterilization of people deemed "unfit" to reproduce.

In 2000, the Supreme Court decided who would be president in its Bush v. Gore decision. It can be argued that their decision was politically motivated.

And so on, and so forth.

*

I also don't think that Mary talked about President Ronald Reagan. Regan was media-savvy, had a celebrity background, and was known for his heavy delegation to staff. And Regan ran his presidency from his Heritage Foundation playbook, just like POTUS is doing today.

*

Mary would say, "When comparing awful presidencies and abysmal Supreme Court decisions, it is important to note that

Americans have always managed to work their way through these mires."

I'm not convinced that this time, we will find our way out of this morass. But I am committed to doing something about it.

Chapter 86 – My Epiphany!

Can we resolve our differences?

Most of the time I think not.

I thought the resolution of this great divide in American democracy could begin with the elimination or reduction of "Partyism." Partyism is a prejudice based on political views and party affiliation. If you get emotionally hostile because I'm a Republican, then you're guilty of partyism. If I get emotionally hostile toward you because you're a Democrat, I am guilty of partyism.

But the more I thought about resolution through the elimination of partyism, the more I realized that seeking agreement between the two radically opposing views would be futile. It is like racial bigotry – despite the fact that we are all homo sapiens regardless of skin color, some people just won't drop their belief that white people are somehow better than Black people, or Asians, or Hispanics. Partyism is just the same — some people won't compromise; they won't modify their beliefs and learn to accommodate other points of view.

The more I thought about how to resolve our political differences, the more convinced I became that Republicans and Democrats would not be able to mend their fences in the short or long term. There is no willingness to compromise any longer, and people have become so polarized and binary that I don't see any short- or long-term resolution.

And then I had my EPIPHANY*! I discovered that I was becoming a socialist!* My goal is for all Americans to unite and work together toward economic equality, universal medical support, and guaranteed human and civil rights. We need to drop all of this DEI stuff, and all of this Immigrant stuff and refocus on what is essential to all of us: economic equality, improved healthcare, and advanced educational opportunities for everyone. Representative democracy either needs to be refocused or eliminated. And today, my belief is the later.

In my view, our "representative" democracy has become binary. You are either a Republican or a Democrat. And if one of those parties controls the system, and you're in the other party, your views and voice are no longer represented. You're marginalized.

Representative Democracy no longer works in the United States. It's time to move to a new, more balanced form of government!

*

I define social democracy as a political and economic system that blends democratic governance with a *commitment to social justice and economic equality*.

Note: I'm not calling for us to abandon capitalism, like some socialist governments do. Cuba, for instance, has a centrally planned economy with a few market elements. North Korea has a self-reliant economy, with centralized control and minimal market activity. I don't want the economic system of either of these countries. I still would like our economy to be based on capitalism.

Social justice can mean a lot of things, but to me it's a commitment to fundamental human rights. The hatred manifest in the current administration's DEI policies is unjust. LGBTQ+ people should have the right to express their gender and sexuality. All races should be treated equally. Immigrants should be dealt with humanely. Those are the social justices I'm seeking – and that the current two-party democratic system is not providing. What happens today is that if I vote Democratic, social justices roll back into government. If I vote Republican, they are withdrawn. Making our government a social democracy would fix this problem.

Economic equality? Sounds like communism – right?

Communism was a stateless, classless society where the means of production were communally owned. I most assuredly don't want this approach. It failed miserably due to corruption, mismanagement of its goals, and wealth disparity – including the formation of an oligarchy-class.

Economic equality enables individuals within a society to have relatively equal access to wealth, income, and economic opportunities in that society. Not everyone has to have the same amount of money. The key to economic equality is to get rid of the extreme disparity between the filthy rich and the poor and destitute. Everyone should have a fair chance to thrive economically.

Thanks to the tax breaks just given to the top ten percent of wage earners via the Big Beautiful Bill, the distance between the rich and the poor is widening — significantly. In the United States today, there is a massive gap between the rich and poor — and the former "middle class" is trending toward "poor."

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Several of the world's social democracies offer better health care and easier access to higher education than the United States.

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In the end, this is what I concluded:

> *We need to change our form of government to better address our needs as a united people. We need to be more inclusive of those who surround us — different genders, different nationalities, different religions. We need to shift the focus from party allegiance to a focus on common goals in medicine, economic equality, and higher learning. If I were a Democrat, I'd base my platform on a significant change in the way we are governed – a move toward social democracy.*

Chapter 87 – The Takeaway

2025 was the most interesting year I have lived through from a politics perspective; the most interesting year in the sixty years that I've been on this planet.

In November, 2024, the American people elected the current POTUS. He took the reins in January, 2025, and began his party's systematic tear down of the U.S. Constitution and American democracy.

His tricks are well known. Declare everything an emergency, thus granting himself supernormal powers. He uses those powers to initiate attacks against basic human rights, such as what he's doing to the DEI and immigrant communities. He has used those powers to create illegal tariffs — tariffs that are paid as an extra duty by the American consumer. He used those powers to initiate conflicts with other nations. He has used those powers to hide politically sensitive documents from the public. Corruption appears to be out of control. And so much more...

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He has been aided and abetted by a Supreme Court that regularly bends to his will. And the most egregious ruling I ever seen in my lifetime — a Supreme Court that has given him immunity for certain acts he has undertaken, or will undertake, while in office.

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And let's not forget the Republican House and Senate. Instead of standing on their own two feet to insist that they have the power to legislate and the power of the purse — they have abdicated those responsibilities to their master in direct conflict with the Constitution. First, they gave up the right of the legislative branch to administer tariffs and taxes. Then they allowed healthcare subsidies to be pulled, yanking healthcare from millions of Americans. But, worst of all, they passed the one *Big Beautiful Bill* — funding POTUS's unconstitutional programs with one sweeping bill — thus mortgaging our futures and the futures of our children to the coffers of interest hungry banks and institutions.

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On a more positive note, this year I learned empathy. I now understand what the MAGA movement is all about. It's about groups of Americans who want major changes in our government. And I, too, want major changes in our government. But I don't want a complete teardown, like the White House East Wing. There are some good programs delivered by the government, such as environmental protection, that should remain in force.

Under the current regime, the U.S. has become an authoritarian government. Yes, we needed change, but this extreme and this vicious? No.

There is a lot of hope that the 2026 midterms might return us to some sort of normalcy. That is, unless the elections are rigged against the common voter with federal government moves to retain Republican power.

In the end, I'm hoping for a balanced normalcy where common ground is found between people who want far less government and people who want a socially responsible government. We can have both if we all learn to work together toward common goals rather than hide in our polarized corners.